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EDITORIAL

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paste

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MANAGING EDITOR Nick Marino

DESIGN DIRECTOR José Reyes
for METALEAP DESIGN (METALEAPDESIGN.COM)

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RANDOM ACTS OF PUBLISHING

Maybe it's the story of a man who transformed his house into an Elvis shrine (pg. 62). It also could be the biography of an acoustic guitar (pg. 44) or Neil Forsyth's gripping feature on the Danish cartoonists whose drawings have sparked worldwide riots and a recent assassination attempt (pg. 54). But looking through the pages of this issue of *Paste*, I'm pretty sure this is the most random issue in our eight-year history.

Our mission as a magazine is two-fold: First, to help you, our readers discover the best music, movies and more—what we call signs of life in popular culture. Second, to surprise and delight you at every turn. We try to find stories you would've never thought to Google—and I'm pretty sure that includes Curt Cloninger's recollection of listening to Stereolab while driving through rural North Carolina (pg. 30), a celebration of the strange genre of appliance rock (pg. 22) and Big Boi's guide to tying a bow tie (pg. 36).

Of course, this April/May double-issue is still packed with two months' worth of the great music, film, books and games you've come to expect from *Paste*, including Best of What's Next artist Anaïs Mitchell's ambitious folk-opera (pg. 38) and an early look at The Low Anthem's sophomore record as we join the band in the studio (pg. 13). Plus, Jason Killingsworth follows Sigur Rós frontman Jónsi to London for our cover story on the Icelander's beautiful first solo album (pg. 48). And Josh Ritter gives us an intimate look inside his songwriting process. (pg. 58).

Write to letters@pastemagazine.com or reach us on Twitter (we're @pastemagazine) and let us know which of our two goals you prefer, which stories sparked your interest this month and which new discoveries we helped you make. Or just send us a random note. We like to be surprised and delighted, too.

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INBOX

A FITTING TRIBUTE

In an age saturated with underdeveloped, throw-away critiques, I was delighted to find Ms. Maddux's article "Is Indie Dead?" (*Paste* #60) full of the crispy crunch of real substance. Her David Foster Wallace-esque obsession with hammering the truth out of the story commanded my attention for the whole of this lengthy obituary. Kudos to Ms. Maddux and the *Paste* team for publishing such a fine piece of journalism. More please!

JUSTIN HESLINGA { Ann Arbor, Mich. }

As a *Paste* subscriber since the magazine's inception, "Is Indie Dead?" is simply the best, and most important, piece you have ever presented.

KEVIN WARD { New York, N.Y. }

LISTENING TO HIS LIFE

In Paste *#60 (pg. 21), Andy Whitman praised the work of American Music Club. Here, the band's frontman responds.*

Much as I try to portray myself as a bon vivant and bright ray of sunshine—ha!—I do actually make records as Band-Aids and balms for gray days and lives. So thanks, Andy—it was a nice read.

You know, once I was in the back of the The Newport watching The Pretenders (on their first tour?), because Ron House insisted that they were the "New Beatles," and the sound was awful and all you could hear was the snare and the guitars. Why does RAWK makes people feel isolated and lost? I stood in the back of the room on my own and thought: I want to make music that reaches people like me. The joy in my heart becomes occluded by the eyes in my head—but it's still joy. I am proud of this record, and I am happy you like it.

MARK EITZEL { San Francisco, Calif. }

AUDIOBOOK QUANDRY

Personally, I have a love/hate thing with the Paste Audiobook Sampler. I want to go listen to the rest of the audiobook when it suddenly stops playing—it's kind of like only listening to 30 seconds of a song. However, with a song, you can usually get the whole thing for about a buck. So, sure, it's fun, but ultimately impractical. I loved seeing some of my favorite authors being read (or reading! Did you have any idea Augusten Burroughs actually sounds like that?!), but 15 minutes is a lot of time to invest in a book that I've never heard of and won't get to finish.

RICK COHEN { Chicago, Ill. }

NOTHING TO PROVE

Corey DuBrowa's review on the latest Carolina Chocalate Drops release (*Paste* #60, pg. 55) gave a very insightful view of their sound, yet the statement "the young trio has been determined to prove that black folk were a huge part of the stringband tradition" caught me off guard. I don't believe that the Chocolate Drops are setting their goals on proving anything expect that they can create great music. This whole thing about black music and string traditions caters more to those who are absolutely ignorant to the origins of the country blues. Let's not forget that the banjo is originally derived from a West African string instrument, so black folk were stringing that guitar long before Europeans ever saw it or heard of it. However, I do agree with the final statement: The Chocolate Drops are the genuine article.

DARRYL LYNN { Richmond, Va. }

ERRATA The feature on Simon Page's International Year of Astronomy posters (*Paste* #60, pg. 29) lists the incorrect website. The correct URL is simoncpage.co.uk.

The photos of Carey Mulligan and Mia Wasikowska were switched in *Paste* #60, pg. 27.

Grizzly Bear was incorrectly listed among artists on the Domino Records roster in *Paste* #60 (pg. 33) The band is signed to Warp Records.

Paste

PRESIDENT Tim Regan-Porter PUBLISHER Nick Purdy

CONTROLLER Tae Jackson
WEB ARCHITECT Philip Garrett
WEB DESIGNER Steve Thorson
WEB DEVELOPER Stacey Goff

BUSINESS INTERNS Ann Cole, Maggie Connor, Kaylie Damen

MUSIC SALES DIRECTOR Nate Douglas
TELEPHONE: 404.207.1182 FAX: 404.378.8872
nate@pastemagazine.com

ONLINE AD SALES
Palmer Houchins
TELEPHONE: 601.951.5884 FAX: 404.378.8872
palmer@pastemagazine.com

NATIONAL ADVERTISING STAFF
NEW YORK
Beth Bernstein
908.654.5050 / 908.518.0632
beth@pastemagazine.com

Mary Anne MacLean
631.367.1988 / 631.367.2018
maryanne@pastemagazine.com

LOS ANGELES
Molly Ballantine
310.351.1312
molly@pastemagazine.com

SAN FRANSISCO/PACIFIC NORTHWEST
Janis McFarling
415.373.5137
janis@pastemagazine.com

CHICAGO & DETROIT
Michael Sanders
773.478.1530
michael@pastemagazine.com

SOUTHWEST
Julian Lowin
512.402.9181
julian@pastemagazine.com

SOUTHEAST
Nick Purdy
404.207.1199
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ONLINE

Reviews of new movies *The Runaways, When You're Strange* and *Kick Ass.* Reviews of new music from The Living Sisters (above), Mark O'Connor and The Strange Boys

Live performances from (from top) Glen Phillips, Joseph Arthur, Nneka and Vienna Teng

Add your own user rating to anything reviewed in this issue!

ONLINE Throughout the magazine, this symbol denotes additional content online. Visit **PasteMagazine.com/April-May10.**

Living Sisters photo by Lauren Dukoff

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NEW MUSIC SAMPLER

1. SHE & HIM "In the Sun"

from *Volume Two.* ℗Merge Records. 2010 ZO Music (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Portland, Ore. & Los Angeles. **Website:** sheandhim.com
(PG. 83)

2. GIVERS "Saw You First"

from *Givers* EP ℗2009 Valcour Records. **Hometown:** Lafayette, La. **Website:** myspace.com/giversmusic

3. MUMFORD & SONS "White Blank Page"

from *Sigh No More* ℗Glassnote Records. Universal Music Publishing. **Hometown:** London **Website:** mumfordandsons.com

4. JAGUAR LOVE "Polaroids & Red Wine"

(J. Whitney/C. Votolato) from *Hologram Jams* ℗2009 Fat Possum Records. Chainwolf Music/Panamajerk Publishing (BMI).
Hometown: Portland, Ore.
Website: myspace.com/jaguarloveband

5. JJ "Let Go"

(J. Benon/E. Kastlander) from *jj n° 3* ℗2010 Secretly Canadian. Copyright control STIM. **Hometown:** Göteborg, Sweden **Website:** www.secretlycanadian.com **(PG. 70)**

6. DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS

"Working This Job" (P. Hood/Drive-By Truckers) from *The Big To-Do* ℗2010 ATO Records. Razor and Tie Music (BMI).
Hometown: Athens, Ga. **Website:** drivebytruckers.com **(PG. 71)**

7. DR. DOG "Stranger"

(T. Leaman/S. McMicken) from *Shame, Shame* ℗2010 ANTI-. Hunter Is A Dog/Chrysalis Music (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Philadelphia, Pa.
Website: drdogmusic.com **(PG. 71)**

8. HAPPY BIRTHDAY "Girls FM"

(K.Thomas/R. Garbus/C. Weisman) from *Happy Birthday.* ℗Sub Pop Records. KT Paints/VIDEO Piano/Bicycle Operator & Coach (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Brattlesboro, Vt. **Website:** subpop.com/artists/happy_birthday

9. ROKY ERICKSON WITH OKKERVIL RIVER

"Goodbye Sweet Dreams" (R. Erickson) from *True Love Cast Out All Evil.* ℗2010 ANTI-. Wixen Music Publishing, Inc. **Hometown:** Austin, Texas **Website:** truelovecastoutallevil.com
(PG. 79)

10. SIERRA LEONE'S REFUGEE ALL STARS "Living Stone"

(M. Kamara) from *Rise & Shine.* ℗Cumbancha. Sweet Salone Music (BMI). **Hometown:** Freetown, Sierra Leone
Website: sierraleonesrefugeeallstars.com
(PG. 79)

11. GALACTIC "Heart of Steel (feat. Irma Thomas)"

(B. Ellman/R. Mercurio/S. Moore/J. Raines/R. Vogel/T. De Clouet/B. Arnovick) from *Ya-Ka-May* ℗2010 ANTI-. Bug Music/Saikodeska/Anonymous Lipstick (BMI)/Wonderbuck/2 Raisins (ASCAP).
Hometown: New Orleans, La.
Website: galacticfunk.com

12. SLOW CLUB "I Was Unconcious, It Was a Dream"

(R. Taylor/C. Watson) from *Yeah, So* ℗2009 Moshi Moshi Records. **Hometown:** Sheffield, England. **Website:** myspace.com/slowclub

13. DEEP SEA DIVER "New Caves"

(J. Dobson) from *New Caves EP* ℗2009 Gypsy Cab Co./WB Music Corp. (ASCAP)
Hometown: Fullerton, Calif.
Website: thisisdeepseadiver.com **(PG. 40)**

14. LET'S WRESTLE

"In Dreams" (W. Gonzalez) from *In the Court of the Wrestling Let's* ℗ 2010 Merge Records. **Hometown:** London. **Website:** myspace.com/letsfuckingwrestle **(PG. 43)**

15. BLACK PRAIRIE

"Red Rocking Chair" (traditional) from *Feast of the Hunters' Moon* ℗2010 Sugar Hill Records, A Welk Music Group. **Hometown:** Portland, Ore. **Website:** myspace.com/blackprairie
(PG. 75)

16. NICK JAINA

"Sleep Child" from *A Bird In The Opera House* ℗2010 Hush Records. Nick Jaina. **Hometown:** Portland, Ore. **Website:** hushrecords.com
(PG. 73)

17. THE MIDDLE EAST

"Blood" (J.Ireland / R.Jones) from *The Recordings of the The Middle East* EP ℗2009 The Middle East. **Hometown:** Townsville, Australia.
Website: themiddleeastmusic.com **(PG. 41)**

18. BETTIE SERVEERT

"Deny All" (C. Van Dyk) from *Pharmacy of Love* ℗2010 Second Motion Records/Palomine Records. Palomine Publishing.
Hometown: Amsterdam.
Website: bettieserveert.com

19. THE TALLEST MAN ON EARTH

"King of Spain" (K. Matsson) from *The Wild Hunt.* ℗2010 Dead Oceans. Copyright control STIM. **Hometown:** Dalarna, Sweden.
Website: deadoceans.com **(PG. 82)**

20. THE WEAKERTHANS

"Benediction" (J. Samson/S. Carroll) from *Live at the Burton Cummings Theatre* ℗Epitaph Records. Copyright Control (The Weakerthans).
Hometown: Winnipeg, Canada. **Website:** theweakerthans.org

BONUS DOWNLOADS PRESENTED BY SHURE

21. GREAT AMERICAN TAXI

"One of These Days" (V. Herman) from *Reckless Habits.* Great American Taxi Records. **Hometown:** Nederland, Colo.
Website: greatamericantaxi.com

22. MORELAND & ARBUCKLE

"Legend of John Henry" (Traditional) from *Flood.* Telarc Records. **Hometown:** Wichita, Kans. **Website:** morelandandarbuckle.com

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Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

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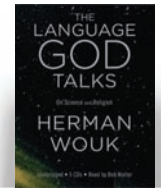

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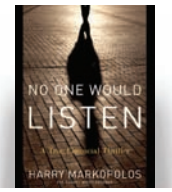

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No One Would Listen

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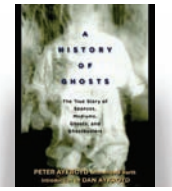

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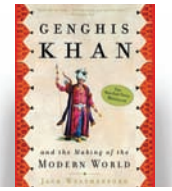
History of Ghosts

Reader: Jeremy Gage - An Excerpt from *History of Ghosts*. © 2010 by Peter Ackroyd. Ⓟ 2010 by Audible, Inc. Courtesy of Audible.com.



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Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World

Reader: Victor Bevine - An Excerpt from *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. © 2010 by Jack Weatherford. Ⓟ 2010 by Audible, Inc. Courtesy of Audible.com.

6. EMILY ARSENAULT

The Broken Teaglass

Readers: Eileen Stevens, Oliver Wyman, Therese Plummer - An Excerpt from *The Broken Teaglass*. © 2010 by Emily Arsenault. Ⓟ 2010 by Audible, Inc. Courtesy of Audible.com.

7. EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

The Singer's Gun

Reader: Emily St. John Mandel - An Excerpt from *The Singer's Gun*. © 2010 Emily St. John Mandel. Courtesy of Unbridled Books.

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NEW MUSIC SAMPLER

1. JOSH RITTER "Change of Time"

(J. Ritter) from *So Runs the World Away*. ℗2010 Pytheas Rcordings. Josh Ritter and Rural Songs (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Moscow, Idaho. **Website:** joshritter.com **(PG. 58) (PG. 86)**

2. PLANTS & ANIMALS "The Mama Papa"

(Plants & Animals) from *La La Land*. ℗2010 Secret City Records, Inc. Secret City Publishing, Inc. **Hometown:** Montreal. **Website:** myspace.com/plantsandanimals

3. THE MYNABIRDS

"Numbers Don't Lie" (L. Burhenn) from *What We Lose in the Fire We Gain in the Flood*. ℗2010 Saddle Creek. Origami Music (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Omaha, Neb. **Website:** themynabirds.com

4. BROKEN SOCIAL SCENE

"World Sick" from *Forgiveness Rock Record*. ℗2010 Arts & Crafts Productions. GalleryAC Music (SOCAN). **Hometown:** Toronto. **Website:** brokensocialscene.ca **(PG. 86)**

5. MERLE HAGGARD

"How Did You Find Me Here" (M. Haggard) from *I Am What I Am*. ℗2010 Vanguard Records, A Welk Music Group Company. HAG Records, Inc. Merle Haggard Music, Inc. (BMI). **Hometown:** Bakersfield, Calif. **Website:** merlehaggard.com

6. PEASANT

"Well Alright" (D. DeRose) from *Shady Retreat*. ℗2010 Paper Garden Records. Peasant (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Doylestown, Pa. **Website:** myspace.com/peasant

7. GREG LASWELL

"Around the Bend" (G. Laswell) from *Take A Bow*. ℗2010 Vanguard Records, A Welk Music Group company. Sony/ATV Tunes LLC, Leg Graswell (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Long Beach, Calif. **Website:** greglaswell.com **(PG. 75)**

8. ELIZABETH COOK

"All The Time" (E. Cook) from *Welder*. ℗2010 31 Tigers. Agent Love Music (SESAC). **Hometown:** Wildwood, Fla. **Website:** elizabeth-cook.com

9. BREATHE OWL BREATHE

"Own Stunts" (Breathe Owl Breathe) from *Magic Central*. ℗2010 Breathe Owl Breathe. **Hometown:** East Jordan, Mich. **Website:** breatheowlbreathe.com

10. THE PAPER RAINCOAT

"Sympathetic Vibrations" (A. Rubarth/A. Wong) from *The Paper Raincoat*. ℗2009 Inspiraled Music/Coin Toss Music (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Brooklyn, N.Y. **Website:** thepaperraincoat.com

11. THE INFAMOUS STRINGDUSTERS

"All The Same" (A. Falco/T. Book) from *Things That Fly*. ℗2010 Sugar Hill Music, A Welk Music Group Company. Nice One Music/Stay Upright Music (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Nashville, Tenn. **Website:** thestringdusters.com

12. LEGENDARY SHACK SHAKERS

"Sin Eater" from *Agridustrial*. ℗2010 Colonel Knowledge Records. Dixie Phobe Music/Matewan Music/D Lineator Music/Alien Autopsy. **Hometown:** Nashville, Tenn. **Website:** theshackshakers.com

13. SAM QUINN

"Late the Other Night" (S. Quinn) from *the fake that sunk a thousand ships*. ℗2010 Ramseur Records. King Leopold Music (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Knoxville, Tenn. **Website:** sambquinn.com **(PG. 77)**

14. TYLER JAMES

"All I Got" (T. James) from *It Took The Fire*. ℗2009 Son Of Geert Music (BMI). **Hometown:** Nashville, Tenn. **Website:** tylerjames.com

15. SARAH JAFFE

"Stay With Me" (S. Jaffe) from *Suburban Nature*. ℗2010 Kirtland Records. **Hometown:** Denton, Texas. **Website:** kirtlandrecords.com

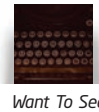
16. SAMBASSADEUR

"Days" (J. Läckberg) from *European*. ℗2009 Labrador Records. **Hometown:** Göteborg, Sweden. **Website:** labrador.se

17. HARPER BLYNN

"This Is It" (P. Harper/J. Blynn/D. Kahne) from Loneliest Generation. ℗2010 Baby Jackal Records. Random Mouse/A&P Music (ASCAP)/Copyright Control/(BMI) **Hometown:** New York. **Website:** myspace.com/harperblynn **(PG. 89)**

18. TYPEFIGHTER



"Ocean Floor" (R. McLaughlin/E. Anderson/J. Crum/M. Voutsas) from *I Want To See You Game, Boys, I Want To See You Brave...* ℗2009 Typefighter. **Hometown:** Washington D.C. **Website:** myspace.com/typefighter

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19. THE SPRING STANDARDS

"Queen of the Lot" (The Spring Standards) from *Would Things Be Different*. ℗2010 Insufficient Funds (BMI). **Hometown:** Brooklyn, N.Y. **Website:** thespringstandards.com

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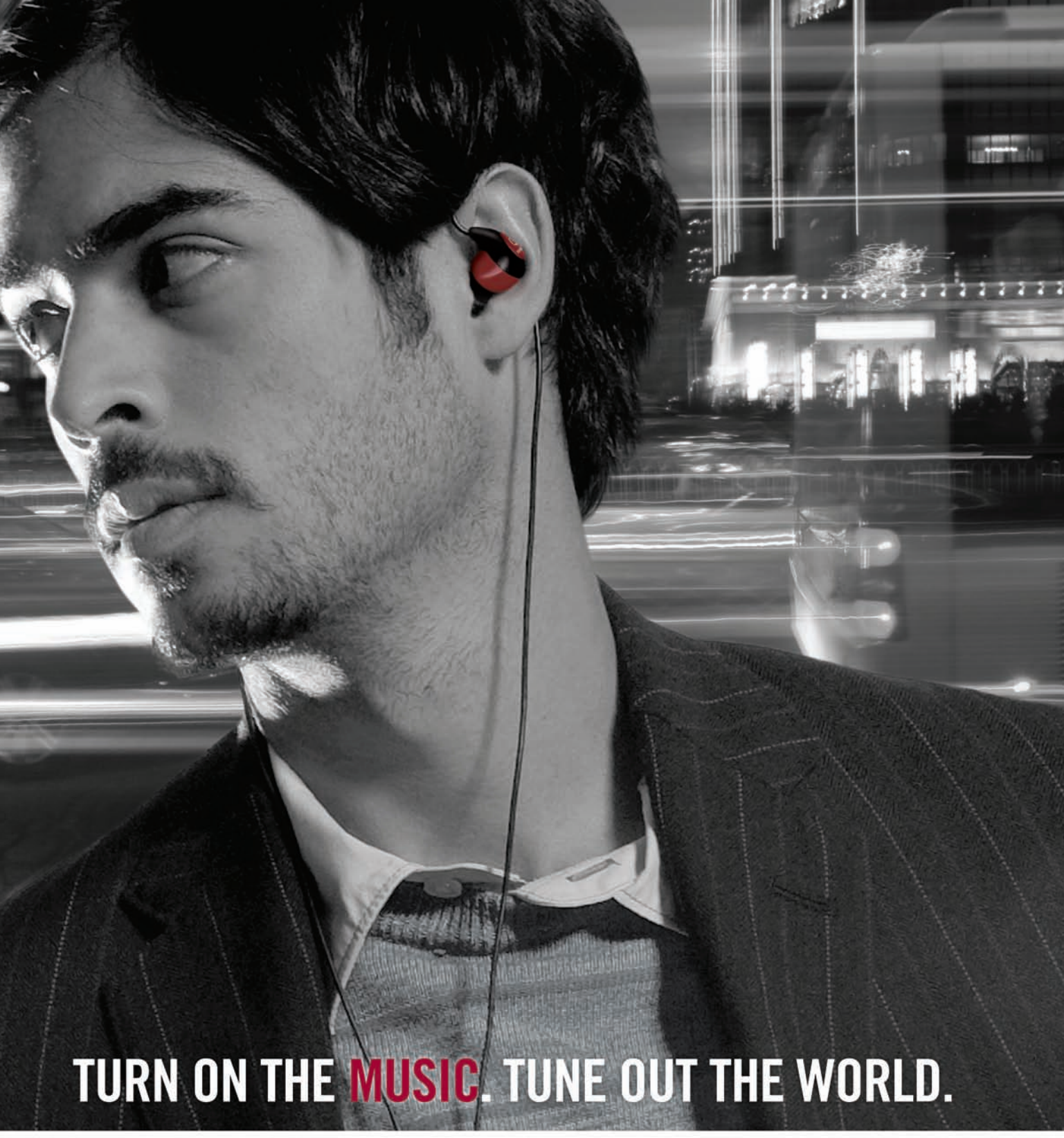

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THE HOLD STEADY, PHOSPHORESCENT, SUMMER MUSIC FESTIVALS, *THE BAFFLER*, AND THE REVENGE OF THE CASSETTE

Photo by Ryan Mastro

THE LOW ANTHEM: IN THE STUDIO

Driving around Pawtucket, R.I. in the frozen clutches of January, it's easy to lose sense of time and place. Gray snow and sooty grime entomb boarded houses, empty storefronts and rusty cars. A few hearty souls point the way to an abandoned pasta sauce factory in a decaying industrial complex. For six weeks, this will be The Low Anthem's recording studio. A fitting backdrop for a band steeped in Kerouac-fueled romps and hardscrabble ballads.

Among the factory's silent smokestacks, broken glass and crumbling brick walls, a welcoming sound beckons anyone willing to climb a four-story fire escape held together by a half dozen fraying bolts. Inside, the band is finishing an unleashed, echoing, just-for-fun jam to loosen up. It's a perfect introduction to the cavernous space, an entire factory floor empty except for a circle of instruments, a recording console, a nourishment nook and a fully functioning court for "baffle ball," an original Low Anthem racquet sport.

As the meager winter sun vanishes and the temperature starts its nightly freefall, the studio's other tenants arrive. First it's the kamikaze bat, then the creepy night watchman, and finally the ghost—according to the watchman, the place is haunted by a matronly spirit.

Band members Ben Knox Miller, Jeff Prystowski, Jocie Adams, new addition Mat Davidson and producer/engineer Jesse Lauter only add to the Scooby-Doo hijinks with their penchant for late night mayhem and copious amounts of pizza. A stack of 82 empty pie boxes looms over an impressive graveyard of Jim Beam handles; both are staples of their nightly ritual. Once the right mixture of each is achieved, lights are extinguished, the noisy furnace is turned off and it's time to record.

The harsh environs have seeped into the music. "There is no fabricated space on this record," Knox Miller says. "Unlike our last album, which was recorded in a very small studio and where the sound came out to meet you, this album is far less forgiving and upfront, and you need to jump into it. In respecting the enormity of this space and its natural reverb, it's creating a sparser mood. The record reflects the recording experience more honestly."

This vibe fills new songs like "Apothecary Love" and "Dreams Can Chase You Down." The latter was recorded with all four members huddled around an upright piano, wrapped in wool blankets; a small band of people nestling together to keep the winter at bay. **JAY SWEET**

BAFFLED ONCE MORE

THOMAS FRANK RESURRECTS JOURNAL OF POP AND POLITICS

I meet Thomas Frank at a chain coffee shop the Washington, D.C. suburbs. The heartland native—who tackled his home state in bestselling book *What's The Matter With Kansas?*—recently moved to the Maryland town of Bethesda, and says he doesn't really know the area. The bland music playing in the background is bothering him. He was just about to ask that it be turned off before I arrived, he says with a laugh. A historic blizzard has just dropped nearly two feet of snow on most of the D.C. region, and people are just starting to return to their normal routines after being snowed in for a week. He's wearing a vintage overcoat from the 1930s.

Frank may be the world's most trend-averse journalist. He has a PhD in history from the University of Chicago. He collects LPs of obscure big bands and a rigid genre of prose called Proletariat fiction (though he admits "The books are terrible. They are really bad.") He's the liberal columnist at *The Wall Street Journal*, for cryin' out loud.

And while other print publications are going Web-only or out of business at an alarming rate, he's helping to restart the journal he founded, *The Baffler*, on glorious paper.

"We do long-form journalism with a certain style to it," he explains with Mid-western matter-of-factness. "I think print is the most successful way to do that."

The Baffler's first volume ran from 1988 to 2007, examining the impact of politics and economics on the arts and culture, and embracing a liberal, populist viewpoint at a time when even the Democratic Party got in bed with champions of a free-market ideology. Since that first run, current events have conspired to put Frank and *The Baffler* in an unusual place—the establishment he railed against now agrees with him. The president champions regulation to protect the average citizen. Even some of the most outspoken Chicago School free-market supporters have admitted they were wrong.

"Our views used to be considered flatly unacceptable," Frank says. "We're not regarded as blasphemous or heretical anymore. That seems to have passed. I think that's because of the economic crisis and the general confusion about it."

The first issue of Vol. 2 contains stories about "the great media die-off," plus Matt Taibbi's review of Rod Blagojevich's memoir and an essay about the relationship between Painter of Light Thomas Kinkade and the real estate bubble. Even in the Age of Obama, *The Baffler* is so contrarian it makes *Slate* look like the *Saturday Evening Post*.

"Having the opposition of the broader world was always important to me. It helped define who I was," Frank says. "We were adversarial...I never chose that role, but it defined who we were. That's always been who I am and what the magazine is. That will have to continue in some way, and we'll find that way."

PAUL J. WILLIAMS

Photo by Wendy Edleberg

THIRTY TIGERS

"What potent blood hath modest May."
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Beth Nielsen Chapman: *Back To Love*

in stores 5/25

"Gorgeous return to mainstream rock" - *Mojo*

Darrell Scott: *A Crooked Road*

in stores 5/25

"...matching Guy Clark and Bruce Springsteen at their best." - *Rolling Stone*

Elizabeth Cook: *Welder*

in stores 5/11

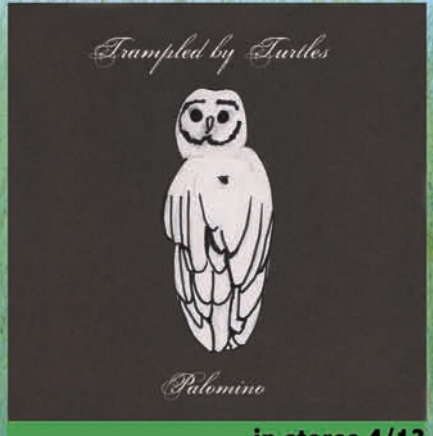
"This generation's Loretta Lynn" - *Nanci Griffith*

Legendary Shack Shakers: *Agridustrial*

in stores 4/13

"Brazen, ramshackle energy" - *Paste Magazine*

Trampled by Turtles: *Palomino*



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"Bill Monroe and Joe Strummer would both be proud" - *SF Bay Guardian*

Jim Lauderdale: *Patchwork River*

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The second collection of songs by Jim Lauderdale and the Grateful Dead's Robert Hunter.

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HAITI'S MUSICAL PAST POINTS THE WAY TO RECOVERY

One devastatingly cold Brooklyn evening in late January, a few dozen people gathered in a warm Park Slope bar called Barbés. The night was mostly a celebration of a newly released box set, *Alan Lomax in Haiti*, and it also featured a screening of a documentary about Brooklyn-based Djarara, the U.S.'s first rara group, plus a rousing performance by the band itself. Organizers didn't disassociate from Haiti's recent earthquake tragedy, though their event had been planned long before. They were there to tell a deeper, older story—a crucial counternarrative.

In December 1936, 21-year-old Lomax arrived in Haiti and spent the next four months recording everything he came upon—"I'm from the Library of Congress" was the only credential he needed to travel across the country. Gage Averill, an ethnomusicologist who wrote the box set's liner notes and gave a lecture before playing audio from the set, told me that Lomax "never had the slightest reservation about asking people to perform." Lomax's relentless, eager documentation resulted in 50 hours of sound recordings and six films.

The Lomax set is relevatory, spanning a spectrum from merengue to Mardi Gras, children's songs to work songs. Then, of course, there's rara, the traditional Haitian parade music played on wooden and recycled handmade instruments, a style kept alive in New York by Djarara. Jeremy Robins and Magali Damas's film, *The Other Side of the Water*, showcases the band's boisterous percussion and homemade horns (often made of PVC pipe), which have been heard everywhere from Prospect Park to the local Ramada Inn. Before the screening, Damas told me that she and Robins wanted to capture the band's "journey of living here in the United States as immigrants—some of them are illegal, some of them are legal—and the struggles that they had to go through to assimilate, and also try to keep a true identity of Haiti within themselves."

Water also presents Djarara as a beacon of and a mirror to New York's own evolving Haitian community, which has experienced discrimination (particularly in the midst of the AIDS crisis, when Haitians were blamed for the epidemic's spread) and integration. These days, Djarara is no longer the nation's only rara band—others are active in Miami and Philadelphia. "I even heard about a group of rara women in Japan," Damas said.

Even *Alan Lomax in Haiti,* with its academic thoroughness, is no longer confined to history. The Lomax recordings are being played on Haitian radio and soundtracking American PSAs with Ben Stiller and Naomi Watts, making room for a depth of understanding that is often lost in crisis-mode coverage. Near the end of his talk, Averill said: "I'm hoping that this box set will play a little role in reminding Haiti of monuments that have not been smashed."

MARK KROTOV

Photos by Alan Lomax/Courtesy of Association For Cultural Equity

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PHOSPHORESCENT
BASKING IN THE GLOW

Shielded from a blustery Brooklyn evening by the concrete walls of his practice space, Matthew Houck wrenches open an Amstel Light using a half-moon tambourine. He shakes off a beat-up motorcycle jacket, lifts one of the room's eight guitars and begins to pick out a fluid melody. The other members of Phosphorescent catch on and join in, piecemeal, to Leonard Cohen's "Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye." Houck—who has called Cohen's songs "secret agents" for how they grab you when you least expect it—shakes his head, croons the chorus and grins.

A hirsuite Alabaman with a kind face, Houck has been the pilot light of Phosphorescent for seven years. He writes country songs in the Hank Williams sense, but first picked up guitar with an ear for Kurt Cobain—a dualism he bears proudly, and well. On 2007 breakout *Pride*, a haunting and transcendent coil of an album, Houck played every instrument himself; for 2009's *To Willie*, a Willie Nelson tribute disc, he enlisted musicians from country outfit Virgin Forest. They've since become fully integrated into the Phosphorescent fold: Crazy Horse to Houck's Young, The Band to his Dylan.

The result of their union is Phosphorescent's latest, *Here's To Taking It Easy*, which Houck says he wrote "after the Rolling Stones finally kicked in." It's got grooves deep enough to hide in and songs that stretch out like horizon-bound highways, an album both sunburned surfers and leather-clad bikers can enjoy. (No big surprise; Houck likes riding his huge Honda 450 chopper out to grab some Far Rockaway waves.) Laced throughout is Houck's brand of shrugging lyrical humor. The album originally included a subtitle that appended *Here's To Taking It Easy* with *Tho The Jaws of This World Wish Only To Grab Hold Of Your Ass.*

Four days after he and the band played Cohen at rehearsal, Houck is the musical guest at a chancy reading series in Greenwich Village. A former dominatrix demonstrates how to hog-tie a sexual slave, a novelist leads Pentecostal prayer to absolve the audience of debt, and Houck closes the night. He runs solo through some restrained Phosphorescent originals before grabbing the mic, swaggering into the crowd and harmonizing with his own looped voice. The crowd roars from their seats at candle-lit tables; his band gawks from the bar in back. It's a raucous cover of "Suspicious Minds," complete with Elvis Presley hip gyrations, Waylon Jennings twang, and a slow-burning howl that curls tight and spreads wide. **HENRY FREEDLAND**

Matthew Houck photo by Sebastian Mlynarski

TAPE DELAY

AFTER YEARS IN THE MUSICAL MARGINS, CASSETTES ARE BACK

The humble cassette—a rectangular, hiss-prone format remembered mostly as a vehicle for amorous adolescent mixtapes—is alive and well in the independent and experimental undergrounds, reigning supreme as the outsider medium du jour. To wit: Pop chameleon Beck is reportedly covering Sonic Youth's *EVOL* on tape. Prior to blowing up with 2009's LP/CD-only *Wavvves*, the California fuzz-rock act Wavves released its 2008 self-titled effort as a cassette on the Fuck It Tapes label. And last year, Dirty Projectors and Deerhunter released limited-edition cassette runs of *Bitte Orca* and *Rainwater Cassette Exchange*, respectively.

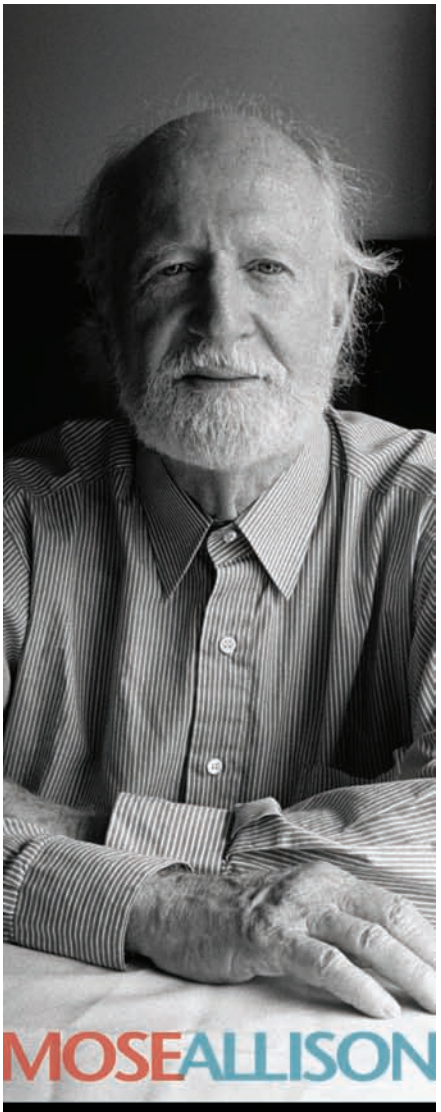
These are small-scale releases, but the demand is real. Deerhunter's 750-copy run, for instance, sold out on tour. "A cassette is like a little painting in your hand," says musician Ted Lee, who operates the Massachusetts-based avant-garde label Feeding Tube. "You can hold it, and you can believe it's there. It's magnetic tape, which sounds great to my ears—cassettes are so alive."

In the CD-obsessed mid-90s, record labels slowly turned their backs on the tape. Retail cassette selections shrank—but didn't die. Department stores still peddle a modicum of tape-friendly stereos, mini boom boxes and Walkman knockoffs; blank tapes can be had everywhere from flea markets to specialty websites to your local barely-hanging-in-there mom 'n' pop record store. The hazards remain, but even for those of us who've accidentally melted cassette copies of, say, Fugazi's *Red Medicine* in a lethally humid VW Jetta, the tape retains a curiously enduring mystique.

Old-school tape-dispensers like Olympia, Wash.'s K Records—which began, for reasons of practicality, as a cassette-only label back in 1982—are still in the game. In February, K released Angelo Spencer's rollicking new album *Et Les Hauts Sommets* album on cassette (among other formats). "The cassette tape format is appealing to people because it is a mechanical object, a pocket-sized plastic and metal machine that can reproduce the sounds of the Olympia underground at high volume," says K co-founder and Beat Happening frontman Calvin Johnson. "It is versatile: Both the blaster on the street and DJ in the club can let it fly and then, the people dance. Erase it, record your own album on the blank slate. Infinite possibilities at a minimum price and maximum joy."

RAYMOND CUMMINGS

Illustration by Josh Baker



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Tucker Martine

Portland, Ore.-based producer Tucker Martine has helmed albums by the likes of The Decemberists, Laura Veirs, Thao with the Get Down Stay Down and Bill Frisell. He just wrapped a record with Tift Merritt, and he makes his own music as Mount Analog. Here's what he's listening to and loving.

GEORGE JONES
Cup of Loneliness MERCURY
For my money, easily one of the great voices of all time, whether he's singing a heartbreaker or "If I don't love you, grits ain't groceries." I love the way the sound cuts through and breaks up all at once.

JIM O'ROURKE ***Bad Timing*** DRAG CITY
He lulls you with his steel-string finger picking and then ambushes you with a wall of horns, electric sounds and steel.

ALICE COLTRANE
Journey in Satchidananda IMPULSE
Perhaps the first jazz record I ever "got." It sounds more sublime every time I hear it. Where does this music come from?

TAPE ***Rideau*** HÄPNA
This Swedish trio made my favorite record to wake up and fall asleep to. This music will improve your dreams.

BILL CALLAHAN ***Sometimes I Wish We Were an Eagle*** DRAG CITY
At the top of his form, and wonderfully recorded. I hang on every word as each of these little sonic films unfold.

SINGING FOR THEIR SUPPER
BANDS LEARN TO COOK ON IFC

When The Smoking Gun first started posting musicians' backstage riders a few years ago, one couldn't help but react with ambivalence. Sure, these weren't the most flattering documents (Limp Bizkit: "(4) Dimmable lamps—Very Important...MUST BE DIMMABLE!!!"; Akon: "Artist requires a Juicer and Blender for juicing and making smoothies"; OutKast: "All meals should be served on china with linen napkins and proper glassware."), but didn't these artists sort of have a point? Even the most softly lit, smoothie-filled greenroom is no substitute for a real dining room. Bands can eat catering off china as an approximation, but nothing beats a home-cooked meal.

IFC's new show, *Dinner with the Band*, aims to bridge the gap between home and the road by showing musicians how to cook tarted-up versions of road-food. If it does nothing else, the series—which premieres April 27th—accomplishes something heretofore thought impossible: making viewers salivate while looking at the lead singer of Les Savvy Fav.

The premise is simple: Take a band, bring it to a gorgeous kitchen, ask a chef to cook something thematically appropriate (say, Sharon Steaks and the Dap Rings), and make the band sing for its supper. The gourmand in question is Sam Mason, who was a pastry chef at WD-50 (New York's molecular gastronomy haven) before he opened Tailor, an exciting but short-lived restaurant where coriander-fried sweetbreads shared the menu with maple-poached snails.

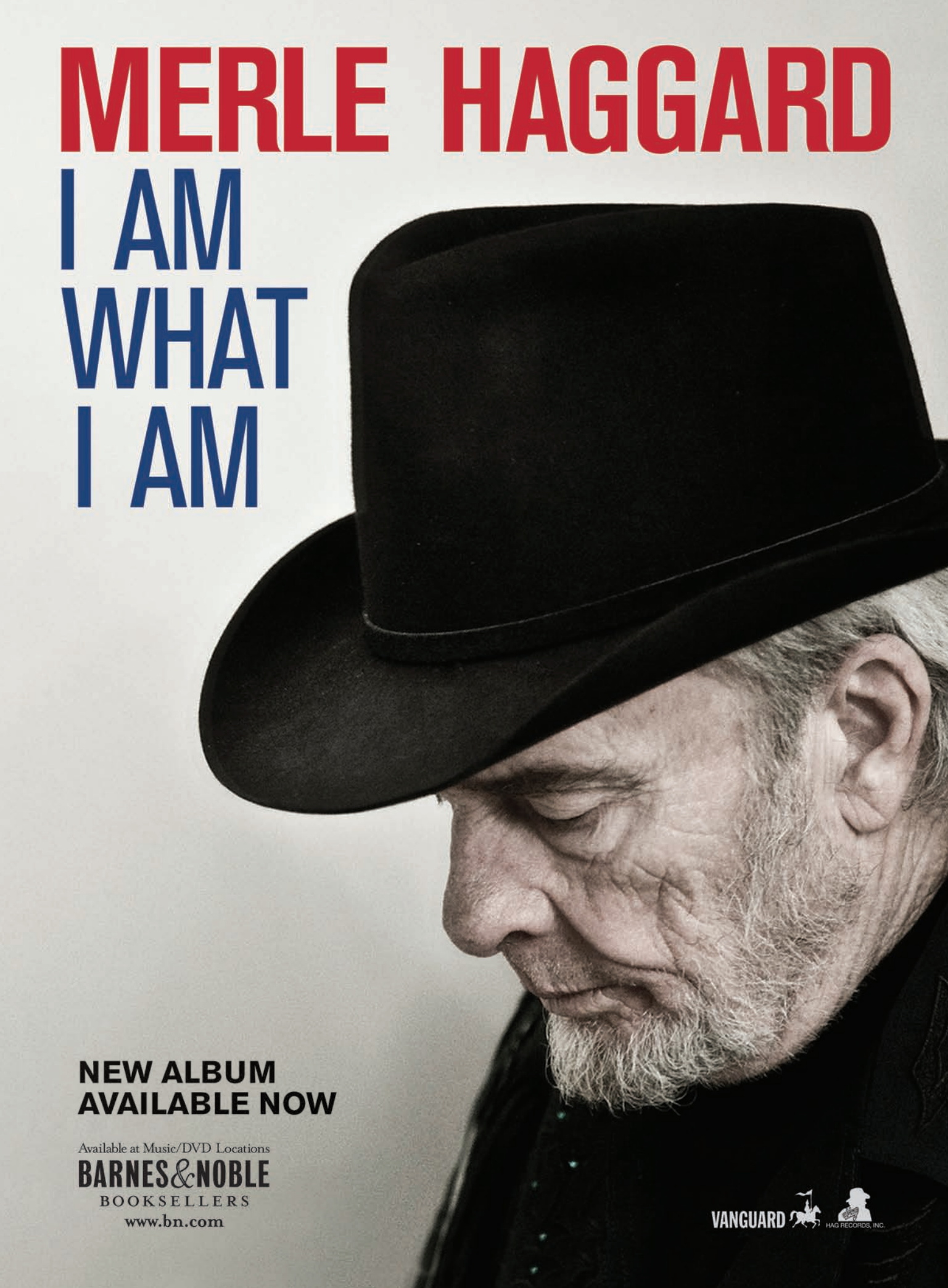
For his TV debut, Mason has toned down the exoticism. "It's just a different kind of cooking," he told *Paste* while out exploring locations for a new restaurant. "I want my mom to be able to whip up any of the dishes." The recipes are approachable and intuitive, with just the right amount of plantain paste or freeze-dried coffee to keep things interesting. If anything, Mason's approach is *too* straightforward—his dexterity in the kitchen calls attention to the artists standing around and drooling. As the chef says, once these musicians get into the kitchen, "they lose a lot of that cool sensibility."

The real question, though, is whether Rufus Wainwright actually plans to cook rabbit schnitzel when he hits the road ("It's super simple," Mason insists). And even if the artists can't replicate Mason's recipes on tour, they'll have new dishes to request from the comfort of their basement dressing room, under the soft glow of a dimmable lamp. **MARK KROTOV**

Photo of Sam Mason by Richard Stokes

MERLE HAGGARD

I AM WHAT I AM



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RHYTHM, DISTORTION AND PYREX BOWLS

Before Iggy Pop became a bare-chested rock icon, he was just another guy with leathery skin and a collection of strange instruments. Circa 1968, his band—then known as the Psychedelic Stooges—wowed crowds with its unique blend of distorted minor-chord jangle, a vacuum cleaner, a water-filled blender and an old oil drum. Of course, Iggy & Co. weren't the first—or the last—to abuse household appliances in the name of music. In honor of The Stooges' induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame this spring, we celebrate the like-minded artists who've carried on a resourceful tradition dating back to the sudsy washboard and the whistling cider jug. **BY RACHEL DOVEY ILLUSTRATIONS BY ADAM ELLISON**

THE NU-BEAMS

This New Wave jazz-punk group rose to local fame in California around 1981, featuring T.L. Ary and his "Ted Tone," a guitar strapped to a mixer sporting rear-view mirrors. On "Oh! Chico, It's So Modern," Ary anthropomorphized household objects with a vengeance, singing about "blenders in the bedroom" and waltzes with barbeques while firing up the Ted Tone, which whined like a go-kart on a killing spree. He claims to have later tricked out his lawnmower with pitch modulators and an octave overdrive repeater.

HARRY PARTCH

This mid-century composer is arguably the founder of modern appliance rock, and he certainly influenced the early Stooges. In search of scales outside the mainstream musical lexicon, he crafted a marimba made of light bulbs and a beat-maker built of Pyrex bowls.

MICACHU AND THE SHAPES

These London-based grimecore experimentalists connect a Hoover hose to the microphone for waves of eerie distortion.

HURRA TORPEDO

Wearing matching polyester suits, this Norwegian trio creates its jolting rhythms by banging on a stove and repeatedly slamming a freezer.

ARTIS THE SPOONMAN

The cutlery-percussion master has performed with everyone from Aerosmith to Zappa, but his most famous guest appearance was in Soundgarden's 1994 "Spoonman" video, where he danced maniacally while clinking out a 50-second bridge.

PHISH

Drummer Jon Fishman has long provided a twist on the June Cleaver aesthetic with his donut-patterned frock and Electrolux vacuum solos—he rewired the machine to blast air *into* his mic.

BECK

Though his 1999 single "Sexx Laws" didn't use any actual kitchen-beats, the stove-on-refrigerator hump-fest that made the music video famous deserves mention among the annals of Appliance Rock, if only for its gadget-liberating statement.

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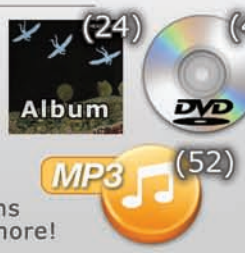

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KILL HENRY SUGAR JOURNEYS THROUGH OLD NEW YORK

Ulysses S. Grant's tomb, a 19th-century mausoleum in upper Manhattan, stands on the frontier between once-crumbling Harlem tenements, Columbia University's manicured campus and the Hudson River. It's a fitting meeting ground for an interview with Erik Della Penna and Dean Sharenow, not only because their band, Kill Henry Sugar, sometimes practices here, but because it represents a point of convergence where New York's past collides with the present, the dead with the living, the rich with the poor. The band's dark, Northeastern roots music resides at this very junction.

"The acoustics are pretty good here and we get to feel like we're connected to something older," says drummer Sharenow, a 40-year-old Sparkill, N.Y. native, of the rehearsal space. "Plus, it's away from the microbrews, organic greens and stores selling products that contain shea butter," adds Bronx-born Della Penna, 44, the guitarist, songwriter and singer.

As homage to their Yankee roots, the duo's sixth and latest album—*Hot Messiah*, recorded aboard a turn-of-the-century Dutch barge on the Hudson—chronicles Gotham's legacy of corruption, immigration and failed promise. The story seems familiar at first; New York inspires too many artists to count. But the city shapes this band's work to an unprecedented degree, right down to the marrow. "You live here as long as we have," Della Penna says, "and you start wondering, 'What was there before that building was there? What's underneath that cobblestone?'" Last year, the pair scored archival Thomas Edison-directed films for the New York Historical Society and wrote songs for the History Channel. Today, the words "old" and "entitled" pepper our conversation.

Kill Henry Sugar's sound is influenced by the simple storytelling of early American composers Stephen Foster and Irving Berlin. Instead of playing chords, Della Penna may pluck his guitar like a bass. Sharenow often trades his sticks for brushes. Vocals range from jaunty, upper-scale harmonies to low, leaden chanting, "like we're whispering directly into your ear," Della Penna says. Though their subject is New York, the mood is rural loneliness. All that's missing is the tumbleweed.

As we're leaving, a Parks Department employee saunters over. "You know, this interview's appropriate," he says to us. "Grant hated music. He once said, 'I only know two songs: One is 'Yankee Doodle,' one isn't.'" As it turns out, the feeling's mutual. Della Penna calls Grant "a prick and an alcoholic."

"We come here mostly because it's peaceful," Sharenow adds, "like a cemetery." **RACHEL CORBETT**

Photo by Wade Schuman

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4-20	Austin, TX	Flamingo Cantina
4-23	Nashville, TN	Rites of Spring Festival
4-24	New Orleans, LA	House of Blues
4-25	Lafayette, LA	Festival International
5-02	New Orleans, LA	Jazz & Heritage
5-07	Tucson, AZ	Rialto Theater
5-08	Phoenix, AZ	MIM Museum Theater
5-09	Phoenix, AZ	MIM Museum Theater
5-12	Los Angeles, CA	The Roxy
5-14	Santa Cruz, CA	Moe's Alley
5-15	San Francisco, CA	The Independent
5-22	Salt Lake City, UT	Living Traditions Festival

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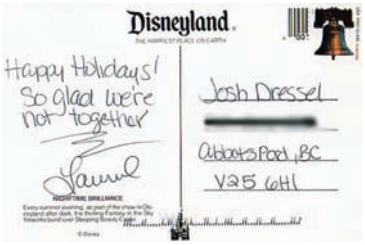
the PASTE 7

OUR FAVORITE ICY BITS OF WHATEVER

1 Josh Jackson, Editor-In-Chief → Aventinus Weizen-Eisbock When Mathilde Schneider created Aventinus beer in 1907, the cold Bavarian winters would often partially freeze it in transit, leaving the resulting brew even more potent. Decades after the invention of temperature-controlled shipping, the eisbock legend lingered. Schneider Weisse brewmaster Hans Peter Drexler recreated this unintended freezing technique, and my favorite German beer was born.



2 Nick Marino, Managing Editor → The Zamboni Bespectacled, bald-headed company founder Frank J. Zamboni started his career indecorously, building an open-air ice-skating rink in Southern California. D'oh! Nine years later, he patented what would become an NHL icon: the hulking, four-wheel-drive ice-resurfacing behemoth that gives frozen hockey ponds their translucent polish.

3 Rachael Maddux, Associate Editor → Ice plant To West Coast residents, the ice plant—which grows on coastlines and highway medians throughout California—probably doesn't seem special. But to my Southern self, its hot-pink flowers and spiny, succulent leaves make it kind of magical. A lovely weed, indeed.

4 Kevin Keller, Multimedia Producer → PassiveAggressiveNotes.com Nothing is quite as cold as a vicious tirade written on a Post-it note decorated with a smiley face. The site is a cornucopia of such hilariously vitriolic memos.

5 Austin Ray, Web Editor → Spherical Ice Tray Set After having a cocktail with perfect, spherical ice at Decatur, Ga. gem Leon's Full Service, I vowed never to sip on ice with edges again. Now, thanks to this handy contraption, I can keep that drunken promise! **MomaStore.org**

6 Michael Saba, Assistant Editor → "Ice Cream" by Raekwon This track from The Chef's magnum opus *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* is more sugary than a cone of soft-serve. Frosty verses from Ghostface and Method might sting like an ice cream headache, but you'll only want to gobble it up faster.

7 Rachel Dovey, Assistant Editor → EnglishRussia.com With the tagline "Only in Russia," this wintry photoblog features gorgeous images of the post-Soviet nation, from exploded power plants bristling with icicles to mammoth frozen plush toys.

SISTER ACT L.A. SIRENS MAKE AN ALBUM

For the past few years, Eleni Mandell, Inara George and Becky Stark—each a staple of Los Angeles' singer/songwriter scene—have moonlighted as a harmony trio called The Living Sisters. Their debut album, *Love to Live*, is evidence of their girl-group charisma and collective ardor for vintage torch-pop. Here's a look at what each brings to the project. **STEVE DOLLAR**

	ELENI MANDELL	INARA GEORGE	BECKY STARK
DAY JOB	L.A.'s most beloved and prolific young singer/songwriter	Fairer half of jazz-pop duo The Bird and the Bee	Frontwoman for neo-Aquarian folk-rock group Lavender Diamond
WHY PEOPLE LOVE HER	Seamless, genre-shifting songs evade indie clichés	Lovely voice, plus ambition: She made the semi-operatic *An Invitation* with Van Dyke Parks in 2008.	Her effervescent, sun-dappled disposition
WHY THEY MIGHT NOT	"[S]he opens herself to whatever creative impulse happens to emerge, even if it's wantonly divergent from the one which emerged the last time she put pen to paper or entered a recording studio." (*No Depression*)	"It's impressive—but so cool and calculated it can be hard to like." (*The Guardian*)	"[Her] billowy pink dresses that make comparisons to Princess Toadstool just *slightly* too easy." (*Pitchfork*)
TRIVIAL PURSUIT	She sings the slinky version of "I Love Paris" used in the infamous Carl's Jr./Hardee's commercial starring Paris Hilton.	At press time, George was expecting her first child with husband Jake Kasdan, the *Walk Hard* director.	Had a small part as the Song Master in the 2008 Bill Murray fantasy epic *City of Ember*.
***LIVE TO LOVE* HIGHLIGHT**	Wrote four of the 10 songs, including the slow-dance lover's query "Ferris Wheel."	Provides feather-light harmonies and the guilelessly retro shoo-wop-a-bopper "Blue."	Penned the Ronstadt-worthy country ballad "Don't Let the Sun Go Down."

Photo by Lauren Dukoff

THE HOLD STEADY SOLDIERS ON

If you got interested in The Hold Steady thanks to their last two albums, you may be in for a surprise on the new one. "Someone was remarking on the lack of whoa-whoa-whoas," singer/songwriter/guitarist Craig Finn says of the sing-along choruses that defined 2006's *Boys and Girls in America* and 2008's *Stay Positive*, yet are largely absent from the new *Heaven Is Whenever*. "We did plenty of that. I still look forward to playing those songs. But on your fifth record, you understand that there's probably going to be a sixth. It's not like do or die. It has its own momentum now."

Heaven Is Whenever is The Hold Steady at its most spacious. Keyboardist Franz Nicolay amicably left the band this winter to pursue solo work, and Finn, guitarist Tad Kubler, bassist Galen Polivka, and drummer Bobby Drake opted to remain a quartet. "The songs were written without [piano], so they inherently have more space," Finn says over coffee near his Greenpoint, Brooklyn home. "I think there's less of a drive to fill up every available corner with bells and whistles."

That comfort also spills into the band's burgeoning role of rock elders. "Soft in the Center," which Finn calls an "advice song," features the lyric, "I know what you're going through / I had to go through that too." "When you're 22 or 19, there's things you think you can't miss," Finn says. "Then you get to 38 and you're home at 9 o'clock and you feel like, 'God, I could miss just about anything. The second coming of Christ? I don't know—let's see if *Drugstore Cowboy* is on'."

Not that the band will take it easy any time soon: A mix of festivals and club dates fills their spring, with more touring likely for later in the year. One reason *Heaven Is Whenever* sounds so lived-in, Finn says, is that many of the songs were road-tested before they hit the studio. Not only that, but the band tried several numbers in different keys, eventually recording 24 songs (10 are on the album). "There wasn't a lot of talk," he says. "There was a lot more action. You start to have frank discussions.: 'I know it's done, but do you see it making the record?' Or, 'I think we could do some cooler stuff on guitar if it were in A rather than G.'

Finn sees the theme of the new album as embedded in its title. "I was thinking a lot about struggle and reward," he says. "Heaven is the ultimate reward in the Christian sense. The record's kind of about understanding struggle as part of the reward itself. Did you see *An Education*? She has this opportunity to kind of skip ahead, marry someone older who's rich, and not have to deal with being bored and not affording things and not having trips to Paris. But that trip to Paris you finally get to take with your friends is going to be sweeter than being whisked off, sort of out of time and out of place. You're really experiencing it. It's sweeter if you struggle."

MICHAELANGELO MATOS

Craig Finn photo by Pier Nicola D'Amico

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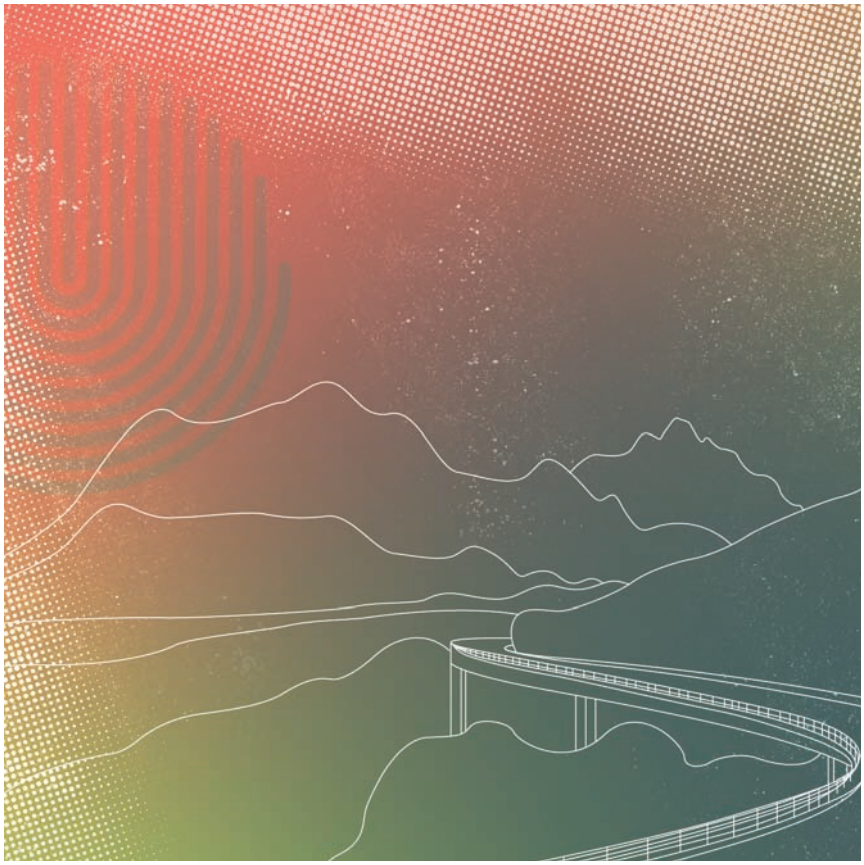
STEREOLAB, NORTH CAROLINA

BY CURT CLONINGER ILLUSTRATION BY JOSH BAKER

When I first moved from the flatlands of south Alabama to the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina, I felt obligated to play bluegrass or old-time fiddle music during every country drive. Any other soundtrack seemed like sacrilege. This lasted for about four months, after which it became painfully obvious that I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life driving around listening to the indigenous sounds of highland yore.

I began experimenting with other genres, other artists that seemed suited to my new terrain. The most confounding and utterly alien turned out to be Stereolab. I'm not a recreational drug user, but I experience Stereolab's entire catalog as a Quaalude cocktail that preserves and amplifies every vaguely idealized and oval-shaped part of early-'60s Modernism. According to iTunes, I own 21 hours of Stereolab music, which lasts for a drive from sunrise to sunset, Saturday and Sunday, strung out on perpetual polyrhythmic ether—pure hypothetical nostalgia for an era I never lived, moving through a landscape that will never call me "local," at a six-cylinder speed unnatural to man or beast.

Descending from Crabtree Mountain pass into the spreading orange folds below—through the communities of Luck and Trust, and into Hot Springs—I am infected by a swelling melancholy unattached to any particular time or place; a pure, qualitative contemplation of uncanny otherness. Hiking in these mountains, I can get to feeling grounded. But skimming their surface at this speed, encased in glass and metal, listening to mutant doo-wop harmonies swirling in electro-punk orchestration feels like being anchored to a cloud.



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In this hyper-real state, the mountains melt. I have only mythologized and idealized them, anyway. They've been a kind of utopia to me, and utopia is Greek for "no place." Stereolab and I move through the Appalachians, but we are not here. The music's faux-modern vibe modulates the pseudo-spell that this landscape's heritage has cast on me, and I lose myself falling through no-space.

Unsettling as the experience is, it seems like a crash course for heaven. In the movie *Jacob's Ladder*, the guardian angel paraphrases Meister Eckhart: "If you're frightened of dying and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freeing you from the earth." Driving through Madison County listening to Stereolab is like passing through a purgatory of Mies van der Rohe architecture and root cellar meth labs, medieval troubadours and cocktail olives, proletarian revolutions and folk revivals, truck tires, barbed wires, rocks, cows, sheep, goats and mini-Moog synthesizers—everything falling away.

Maybe I should cease these Sunday drives, conserve gas, decrease my carbon footprint and take some clawhammer banjo lessons instead. But I probably won't. Every attempted return to an idealized past only winds up thrusting me forward. False nostalgia for a modern utopia that never materialized commingles with transplanted longing for an old-timey time that never existed, and a new ghost is born. To quote Stereolab (quoting Freud), "This is the future of an illusion." Winding home past Max Patch and Fines Creek on a fall evening, orange leaves die, an orange sun sets, lounge chords seep into the present and darkness rises.

➥ CURT CLONINGER IS AN ARTIST AND WRITER WHO TEACHES NEW MEDIA AT UNC ASHEVILLE. HE MAINTAINS LAB404.COM, PLAYDAMAGE.ORG, AND DEEPYOUNG.ORG.

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PASTE

SUMMER FESTIVAL GUIDE 2010

CONTRIBUTING: KRISTEN CALLIHAN AND ANNA SWINDLE

➥ Photo by Christopher Nelson

BONNAROO

Seven-hundred sprawling acres provide ample space for hippies and hipsters alike to enjoy the impressive music and comedy lineup spread across the festival's multiple stages.

DATES: June 10-13
LOCATION: Manchester, Tenn.
TICKETS: $234.50 and up for a four-day pass
HEADLINERS: Jay-Z, Dave Matthews Band, Stevie Wonder, Kings of Leon
ATTENDANCE: 80,000/weekend
WEBSITE: Bonnaroo.com

PITCHFORK

Its biggest selling point is its cost: Ticket prices are low without sacrificing lineup quality.

DATES: July 16-18
LOCATION: Chicago (Union Park)
TICKETS: $40 per day, $90 for a three-day pass
HEADLINERS: Pavement, LCD Soundsystem, Modest Mouse, Raekwon
ATTENDANCE: 18,000/day
WEBSITE: PitchforkMusicFestival.com

NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL

At 51, Newport Folk Fest is the oldest (and arguably classiest) of the summer bunch, combining a historic setting with an equally notable lineup.

DATES: July 30-August 1
LOCATION: Newport, R.I. (Fort Adams)
TICKETS: $125
HEADLINERS: Andrew Bird, The Avett Brothers, John Prine, Swell Season, Jim James, Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings
ATTENDANCE: 10,000/day
WEBSITE: NewportFolkFest.net

SASQUATCH!

Photo by Sean Peckrold

Intentionally situated in the middle of nowhere, Sasquatch! boasts awe-inspiring natural beauty with the famous Gorge Ampitheatre for its main stage.

DATES: May 29-31
LOCATION: George, Wash.
TICKETS: $70 per day advance, $80 at the gate
HEADLINERS: Pavement, MGMT, Vampire Weekend, My Morning Jacket
ATTENDANCE: 25,000/day
WEBSITE: SasquatchFestival.com

FESTIVAL BINGO MARK A SQUARE IF YOU...

CUT YOUR HAIR AND HAVE A DATE WITH IKEA AT SASQUATCH!, COACHELLA OR PITCHFORK.	TEST THE LOITERING LAWS AT HANGOUT BEACH.	BRING JAY LENO MASK, START UGLY STUFF IN THE CONAN O'BRIEN PIT AT BONNAROO.	BUILD A SPIDER HOLE IN ZILKER PARK DURING SXSW, EMERGE DURING ACL.
BELIEVE THE LADY GAGA AND SOUNDGARDEN RUMORS FOR LOLLAPALOOZA, PACK MIRRORED FLANNEL NEGLIGEE.	CONVERT SUMMERFEST TO OKTOBERFEST WITH MILWAUKEE'S BEST.	CATCH SIMON & GARFUNKEL AT JAZZ FEST, GARFUNKEL & OATES AT SASQUATCH! AND HALL AND CHROMEO AT BONNAROO.	RECOVER FROM ROCK ON THE RANGE WHIPLASH IN TIME FOR TRANSATLANTIC THRASH AT DOWNLOAD.
WEAR BALD-EAGLE BELT BUCKLE TO COACHELLA AND STAGECOACH WITH VARYING AMOUNTS OF IRONY.	CONFUSE TREASURE ISLAND AND ALCATRAZ, COMPLAIN ABOUT CAMPING ACCOMMODATIONS	DEBATE WHETHER HARDLY STRICTLY BLUEGRASS IS STILL SUFFICIENTLY PARTIALLY BLUEGRASS.	DISCOVER THAT BUMBERSHOOT IS NOT A WATERPARK ATTRACTION.
TRY TO RESURRECT LANGERADO BY IMPORTING CEREMONIAL MUD FROM GLASTONBURY.	FIND NEXT WEEK'S HANGOVERS AT ALL TOMORROW'S PARTIES.	SCREAM "FREE BIRD" IN THE DANCE TENT UNTIL THEY PELT YOU WITH GLOWSTICKS.	KICK IT IN THE CHILLOUT TENT OVER ORANGES AND CIGARETTES.

BY JEFF LEVEN

HOW TO NOT DIE AT A FESTIVAL

The medical tent may not *seem* like the hotspot at any music festival, but it's there for a reason: These events are all fun and games until somebody gets hurt—or worse. In eight years of Bonnaroo, there have been seven deaths; a 39-year-old man died of a heart attack last year at Lollapalooza; and in 2000, at Denmark's Roskilde Festival, eight fans were crushed to death in a stampede. Some of these episodes were more preventable than others. (One of the Bonnaroo deaths reportedly came when a man hopped a fence, walked onto an interstate and was struck by Ricky Skaggs' tour bus.) In most cases, common-sense tips like the following can keep you alive:

DRINK SOMETHING OTHER THAN BEER

Like water, for example. "I think it's important if it's over 80 degrees to drink at least one 16-ounce bottle of water per hour," advises Dr. Rahul Khare of Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital. "At least three to four bottles of water per day is a good rule of thumb." But that's just if water is all you're drinking. "Alcohol can increase urine rate, thus adversely affecting hydration," warns Dr. Craig Crandall of University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center of Dallas. So you might want to up the H2O if you're downing tons of booze.

SET A MEETING PLACE

"People will get intoxicated and they lose each other in the crowd, then they can't find a friend," says Sgt. Keith Bazzle of the Austin Police Department, who's worked at the Austin City Limits fest. "Their friend is probably at the medical tent or laid up under a tree somewhere and trying to get in shape. So that's the problem I see, people not having a rally point."

TRUST YOUR CLAUSTROPHOBIC INSTINCTS

"If you feel uncomfortable, don't ignore that—move somewhere else," says Paul Wertheimer, founder and head of international group Crowd Management Strategies. "It's a personal alarm that something might happen, so move to the periphery."

LOLLAPALOOZA

Long the go-to fest for music lovers who hate camping, Lolla manages to stage a full-blown festival smack in the middle of a metropolis.

DATES: August 6-8
LOCATION: Chicago (Grant Park)
TICKETS: $190 advance, $215 at the gate
HEADLINERS: The Strokes, Arcade Fire, Lady Gaga, Green Day, Soundgarden, Phoenix
ATTENDANCE: 65,000/day
WEBSITE: Lollapalooza.com

ALL TOMORROW'S PARTIES NEW YORK

This year's incarnation is partly curated by filmmaker Jim Jarmusch

DATES: September 3-5
LOCATION: Monticello, N.Y. (Kutsher's Country Club)
TICKETS: $250 three-day pass
HEADLINERS: Iggy & the Stooges, Sonic Youth, Explosions in the Sky
ATTENDANCE: 2,700/day
WEBSITE: ATPFestival.com

BUMBERSHOOT

Seattle's perennial event combines music, dance, film and other arts to create a multi-faceted experience under the shadow of the city's iconic Space Needle.

DATES: September 4-6
LOCATION: Seattle (Seattle Center)
TICKETS AND HEADLINERS: TBA
ATTENDANCE: 50,000/day
WEBSITE: Bumbershoot.org

FESTIVAL FOOD THAT DOESN'T SUCK

Man cannot survive on Pronto Pups alone. You're at a festival, you've gotta eat—but what? Everyone knows the usual options: mini-pizzas, fried meat on sticks, overpriced beer. Still, a few fests offer more than the outdoor equivalent of a mall food court. The champ here is **Pitchfork** (Chicago, July 16-18), which features a bevy of stands from area restaurants, including Southern-food favorites **Robinson's Ribs** and **Wishbone**, veteran German sausage specialists **Berghoff**, Thai powerhouse **Star of Siam**, and vegan fare from **Chicago Diner**. In Seattle, **Bumbershoot** (Sept. 5-7) has a number of quality stands. Make sure to hit **Bringer Farms' Giant Strawberry Shortcake**, plus the two **Corn Roasters** stands for whole cobs and a plethora of toppings. Remember, too, that sometimes food-court staples become that way for a reason. **Siren Festival** (New York, July 17) takes place on Coney Island, meaning you can line up for a **Nathan's Famous** hot dog at the chain's original location. History counts, right?

MICHAELANGELO MATOS

LILITH 2.0

After an 11-year hiatus, the traveling ladies of Lilith return with an impressive lineup: Living legends Emmylou Harris and Loretta Lynn will perform alongside a diverse cast of artists such as Cat Power, Metric, Erykah Badu, Kate Nash, Tegan and Sara, Janelle Monáe, and festival co-founder Sarah McLachlan. A huge list (36 dates, so far) of shows/cities have been announced for Lilith 2010, with a portion of proceeds going to charity.

KIDS' CORNER

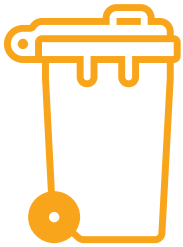
Music festivals can be surprisingly kid-friendly: Most offer free admission or discounted tickets for tykes while some boast extensive games, bands and other G-rated activities for the little ones. At Bonnaroo's Kidz Jam, children can express themselves with recycling art projects and kids instruments; meanwhile, tots at Kidzapalooza will be sufficiently rocked by bands like Lunch Money and Care Bears on Fire, while sporting new hairdooz and tattooz. For the more pragmatic parent, ACL offers Tag-a-Kid, giving children numbered wrist bands in case they lose mom and dad in a mosh pit.

AUSTIN CITY LIMITS

Technically this is a fall festival, but the Austin weather and ACL's breezy vibe will make you forget that Halloween's just around the corner.

DATES: October 8-10
LOCATION: Austin, Texas (Zilker Park)
TICKETS: $165 advance three-day pass, $185 regular three-day pass
HEADLINERS: TBA
ATTENDANCE: 65,000/day
WEBSITE: ACLFestival.com

REDUCE, REUSE, ROCK 'N' ROLL



Most major festivals have found a way for people to support music and the environment at the same time. Last year, Austin City Limits gave away a Honda Insight hybrid. Pitchfork recycled a whopping 46 percent of festival-generated waste, and this year organizers want to exceed 50 percent—initiatives include biodiesel-powered generators and a recycling store where people can swap their trash for swag. "We've researched different companies that do good work in the carbon offset market," says fest publicist Jessica Linker, "ones that make sure people are able to see where their money is going." Meanwhile, Lollapalooza-goers can stock up on stylish-yet-eco-friendly Lolla Green Goods at festival merch tents. Earlier this year, Bonnaroo organizers offered a compilation of live tracks from past festival performers for fans speaking out about climate change legislation. And this year's Sasquatch! Music Festival has been dubbed "carbon negative," with wind whipping up the power for the entire event. "It's an ethical choice to maintain responsible practices in all areas of the venture," says Sasquatch! creator and producer Adam Zacks. "The Columbia River Gorge is truly one of the planet's great natural wonders."

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BOW-TIE FLY

BY NICK MARINO

PHOTOS BY EVAN BARTLESON/4.AMOEBA STUDIO

When OutKast started making records back in the mid-'90s, André "3000" Benjamin and Antwan "Big Boi" Patton looked like ordinary dudes. "The budgets weren't that big at the time," Big Boi says today. "So a clean pair of socks, flip-flops and tracksuits was the attire." As OutKast became legendary, their fashion sense grew more ambitious. The duo's last great album, 2003's *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, featured a song called "Bowtie" that summed up the transformation: "Crocodile on my feet / Fox fur on my back / Bow tie 'round my neck / That's why they call me the gangsta mack." So when *Paste* decided to run a spread on bow ties, we knew who to call. "When you have on a bow tie, the bow tie commands respect," Big Boi says. "And if you got a bow tie on, you gotta be a bad motherfucker to have a bow tie on. Especially if it's not a clip-on and you tied it yourself." Here, he shows us how.

WE ASKED BIG BOI TO PICK A HANDFUL OF HIS FAVORITE BOW TIES, AND EXPLAIN WHY HE LIKES THEM. AFTER A WHILE, WE BEGAN TO NOTICE A THEME.

Deep Red Ready-to-Wear $47 ThomasPink.com
"It looks like some diamond-cut velour—I got that type of material inside my Cadillac, too, so it's real soft. Girls like things like that. I like what girls like."

Traditional Stripe $15 TheTieBar.com
"The green, contrasted with the royal blue—I'm all about colors. And girls are attracted to colors. And I'm attracted to what girls like."

Organic Paisley $15 TheTieBar.com
"That one to me is very regal. That's the dressiest one out of all of them. That looks almost like a wedding bow tie."

Tan Apple & Blue Brown Plaid $20 Intwined.Etsy.com
"That one is fun just because it looks like a summer day. You could probably wear that with some shorts—like an oxford and some shorts, just going to have mojitos with your girl. You always gotta incorporate girls into it."

SINGER/SONGWRITER

ANAÏS MITCHELL WE ARE THE UNDERWORLD

Twenty-nine-year-old singer/songwriter Anaïs Mitchell lives in a little house in western Vermont where she tends her fire, writes songs and occasionally gets a wild hair to do something like, say, mastermind a full-on stage musical, set in a post-apocalyptic company town, that re-imagines the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

That's what she did in 2005, at least, with the help of a few old friends, local musician/composer Michael Chorney and director Ben T. Matchstick. The show was called *Hadestown*—named after the Greek god of the underworld, from whom the poet Orpheus must rescue his young bride Eurydice—and it premiered in late 2006 with a hometown cast working on just two weeks of rehearsal. After a few years of obsessive revisions, in 2009 Mitchell assembled a cast of new friends—including Ani DiFranco, Midwestern folkster Greg Brown, Ben Knox Miller from The Low Anthem and Bon Iver's Justin Vernon—to record a full-on album version of her "folk opera," which will finally see light outside of Vermont in March.

Mitchell hopped around the country to record each artist's individual vocal tracks, once doing a whirlwind 24-hours in Wisconsin with Vernon, driving 10 hours to record Brown in Iowa City, then shuttling to Minneapolis and flying back to her producer Todd Sickafoose's studio in Brooklyn. She was too grateful for their contributions to really mind the travel, she says, though she admits "it's kind of like a crazy wet dream to imagine all those singers in the same studio, kind of like 'We are the World.'"

If everyone's schedules agree, Mitchell says she'd "love nothing more" than to perform the album onstage with the full cast this spring. In the meantime, she's working on her fourth proper solo album, which she expects will have a less direct narrative than *Hadestown*, but could play on some of the same ancient tensions and archetypes. "You don't have to make something out of nothing," she says. "There are echos of things, and they're echoing and echoing back as long as we can remember."

RACHAEL MADDUX | ILLUSTRATION BY ZELA LOBB

ANAÏS MITCHELL

HOMETOWN: Montpelier, Vt.
ALBUM: *Hadestown*
FOR FANS OF: Bon Iver, Ani DiFranco, The Decemberists

MATTHEW ALBANESE
SMALL WONDER

ARTIST/PHOTOGRAPHER

Two years ago, 26-year-old New Jersey-based photographer Matthew Albanese stepped into his studio's kitchen to take a break from a tedious catalogue shoot. Dazed from the boredom of yet another morning spent trying to creatively photograph a calculator, he knocked over a jar of paprika. "I guess I was looking for distraction," he says. "Instead of cleaning it up, I started playing with it and from somewhere I decided that it looked like the surface of Mars."

It was a fittingly strange starting point to a side project that has pushed Albanese into the limelight (online, at least). Inspired by that clumsy spice encounter, the SUNY Purchase graduate began to produce miniaturized versions of landscapes using kitchen-cabinet supplies—cinnamon, tile grout, steel wool, cotton, faux fur, glass, sugar. Each piece takes around a month to construct; he photographs them from perspective-warping angles to maximize realism, then destroys the set and begins another.

MATTHEW ALBANESE
HOMETOWN: Lincoln Park, N.J.
WEBSITE: MatthewAlbanese.com
FOR FANS OF: Ansel Adams, playing with your food

The photos are stunning for their ambition and sheer believability, so it's no surprise that when they hit the blogosphere earlier this year, Albanese's phone started ringing. "Suddenly I'm getting a lot of interest," he says, noting that he now sells prints of his work. "If it wasn't for the Internet, I'd just be making these things for myself."

Albanese might spend his days looming godlike above his scenes, but he sees himself less as a creator than as part of the work itself. "I can completely see myself in these worlds I'm making—in amongst the trees, walking through the fields," he says. "The landscapes start from song lyrics, poetry or my own emotion. If I'm angry then I make something angry, if I'm happy I make something happy. It's simple, really." **NEIL FORSYTH**

Photos by Matthew Albanese

DEEP SEA DIVER KEEPS SWIMMING

BAND

Jessica Dobson's searing voice is at first the most striking element of ethereal trio Deep Sea Diver—until you notice her skill at coaxing beautiful sounds out of a guitar. It was this knack that landed her a shot-in-the-dark gig as Beck's lead guitarist on a 2008 world tour. "I couldn't believe I was actually playing in the Hollywood Bowl," she reminisces. "But I met so many musicians along the way who kept reminding me that I didn't need to take every offer that came my way, and that I needed to just keep working on Deep Sea Diver."

After dog-paddling in major label bureaucracy for two years to no avail (she signed with Atlantic Records in 2004 but was let go in 2008, after recording—and shelving—two full LPs) Dobson finally spotted land. After self-releasing the *New Caves* EP in 2009 and spending a few weeks on the road with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Conor Oberst, Dobson and her Deep Sea Diver instrumentalists are back in the studio for their debut full-length. *New Caves* is viscously atmospheric, with songs that recall both Chan Marshall and Nick Cave. "It's been wonderful, having so much freedom and control over the music," Dobson says. "Starting out in the music industry was so much business that it left me with a huge distaste in my mouth. It's such a different thing this time around—the music is so much more pure."

Dobson's experience with Atlantic was a disorienting sea to navigate, and the exquisite songs on the EP echo her confusion. In her hauntingly gorgeous wail, Dobson sings of going it alone, of finding your way home and of jumping from life's sinking ships. "I see so many people in my life who just stay the same," she says. "But I'd rather die than stay the same my whole life." **GRAY CHAPMAN**

DEEP SEA DIVER

HOMETOWN: Long Beach, Calif.
ALBUM: *New Caves* EP
BAND MEMBERS: Jessica Dobson (vocals, guitar), Peter Mansen (drums), John Raines (bass)
FOR FANS OF: Cat Power, Fiona Apple, Bat for Lashes

Photo by Martin Vielma

PEACE IN **THE MIDDLE EAST** BAND

The history of The Middle East is decidedly less conflicted than the band's name might suggest. The seven-piece formed in 2005 and played gigs around Townsville, a remote shore town in northeastern Australia, then disbanded when guitarist Jordan Ireland decamped to Germany. Now that he's back, the band is up to its old tricks, creating densely layered songs that reside somewhere in the volatile territory between folk and post-rock. Their debut EP, released last October, at first seems to be all quiet moments and rich, delicate harmonies, but it's sporadically interrupted by bursts of enthusiastic horns, drums, glockenspiel and squealing electric guitar.

Though the band has had a bit of fun with its name (the EP is titled *The Recordings of the Middle East*, and their MySpace handle is "visitthemiddleeast") co-frontman Rohin Jones insists it doesn't have any profound political meaning. "When we first started, we just needed a name for a poster for a show that we were doing. And I was watching a documentary on Yasir Arafat, and was like, 'Why don't we call the band The Middle East?'" he says. "I don't think we're trying to 'say' anything—though I guess it could seem like a controversial name, at the moment."

THE MIDDLE EAST

HOMETOWN: Townsville, Queensland, Australia
ALBUM: *The Recordings of the Middle East* EP
BAND MEMBERS: Mike Haydon (drums, accordion), Jordan Ireland (guitar, lead vocals), Rohin Jones (guitar, lead vocals), Jack Saltmiras (bass), Mark Myers, Bree Tranter, Joseph Ireland (all multi-instrumentalists)
FOR FANS OF: Bon Iver, Doves, The Antlers

The band is green enough that it doesn't even have proper press photos, though all of the members recently quit their day jobs for their current spring tour. The route won't land the band anywhere near southwestern Asia, but will take them across Australia and to the U.S., including stops at SXSW and Coachella. "We're definitely not the most let's-go-crazy kind of band," Jones says. "Nothing really dramatic has happened on this tour. Oh, actually, I broke my collarbone ... I'm still kind of healing and it's still kind of painful, but I'm fine. Doing great!"" **ALEXANDRIA SYMONDS**

Photo by Jordan Ireland

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CHRISTOPHER THORNTON DELICIOUS DEBUT

CHRISTOPHER THORNTON
HOMETOWN: New Orleans
FILM: *Sympathy for Delicious*
FOR FANS OF: Mark Ruffalo, Benicio Del Toro, Peter Krause

Christopher Thornton, the star of Mark Ruffalo's directorial debut *Sympathy for Delicious*, has lived a life that would make a pretty compelling film of its own. Nearly two decades ago, after spending a couple of years at the University of New Orleans' acclaimed theatre program, he headed to the Stella Adler Conservatory in Los Angeles and studied under the acclaimed actress herself, alongside such future stars as Benicio Del Toro and Salma Hayek.

Ruffalo, also a classmate, claims Thornton was one of the group's best. But not long after, a rock climbing accident left the young Louisianan paralyzed from the waist down. As the devastated Thornton healed, Ruffalo convinced him to join a stage production of *Waiting for Godot*; Thornton was reluctant, but the show wound up being the turning point in his recovery. "People just went crazy for it—it was one of my greatest experiences as an actor," Thornton says. "And, unbeknownst to me, it was great therapy, because onstage all you care about is not being terrible, trying to make the play work."

Thornton eventually shaped his experience into a screenplay about an agnostic paraplegic DJ who gains the power to heal others but can't help himself; Ruffalo fell in love with the script and signed on to direct. Nine years, countless rewrites and one exhausting shoot later, *Sympathy for Delicious* became a reality, premiering this January at Sundance and later winning the festival's Special Jury Prize.

The movie features strong performances from Ruffalo, Orlando Bloom and Laura Linney, but Thornton stands out the most. As the main character, he projects a primal frustration without devolving into melodrama, and when he's catapulted to fame as an unlikely rock star, he's just as bewildered as everyone around him. When *Delicious* does the same for Thornton, though, he shouldn't be so surprised. **MICHAEL DUNAWAY**

LET'S WRESTLE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

BAND

Photo by Pat Graham

Mike Lightning and his Let's Wrestle bandmates might all be barely 20 years old, and they might still live with their parents, and he might do a dead-on Zach Efron impression, but no one here belongs in the squeaky-clean world of *High School Musical*. These North London upstarts play a scuffed-up brand of twee-punk that begs for Buzzcocks comparisons and doesn't skimp on the ba-ba-ba's. They sing an eponymous song that proclaims "pro wrestling is the way forward." They surf cars on crowded Cardiff streets. And over the course of their short lives, they may have stolen a beer.

Or 288.

Whatever.

Singer/guitarist Wesley Patrick Gonzalez and bassist Lightning met as 12-year-old kids at the same North London school The Kinks once attended. Lightning wore a Kermit the Frog costume to school and Gonzalez thought, "I can dig it"; Lightning respected Gonzalez's Sex Pistols bag and Nirvana t-shirt. They started playing music together, an early career boost coming soon after when anti-folk singer-songwriter Jeffrey Lewis asked the pre-teen project to open one of his London shows. Let's Wrestle has since cycled through a few lineups, most recently adding Darkus Bishop on drums, but Gonzalez and Lightning's earliest meeting still resonates; the band's debut LP, *In The Court of the Wrestling Let's*, pairs boorish sneering with earnest avowals not all that far removed from "It's Not Easy Being Green."

Princess Diana also ranks among their strange cultural touchstones, though the trio's combined age wasn't yet 20 when she died in 1997. The guys once found a painting of a girl that looked like a more youthful Princess of Wales, and an homage video captures the same impish glee present in most of the band's endeavors. Find it on YouTube. They're just kids on a bed holding a picture of a girlish, cat-cradling Lady Di lookalike, crooning a shambling, punkish tune. Nevermind your senescence, here comes Let's Wrestle. **HENRY FREEDLAND**

LET'S WRESTLE

HOMETOWN: London
ALBUM: *In The Court of The Wrestling Let's*
BAND MEMBERS: Darkus Bishop (drums), Wesley Patrick Gonzalez (guitar, vocals), Mike Lightning (bass, vocals)
FOR FANS OF: Television Personalities, The Wedding Present, McLusky

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BEHOLD A

GIBSON'S TRUSTY J-45 EMERGED DURING WORLD WAR II.

DARK

NOW THE GUITAR ITSELF IS UNDER FIRE.

HORSE

BY JENNA WOGINRICH

THE ONLY PHOTOGRAPH I CARRY IN MY WALLET IS OF A GIBSON J-45. THE DARK ACOUSTIC GUITAR APPEALED TO ME ON A VISCERAL LEVEL BEFORE I EVEN KNEW ITS NAME, AND WITHIN A FEW MONTHS OF PULLING ONE OFF A GUITAR SHOP'S WALL AND PLAYING IT FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE OLD STANDARD FLATTOP HAD SEDUCED ME. I'VE BOUGHT BOOKS, COLLECTED ARCHIVES, DEVOURED WHATEVER RESEARCH I COULD GATHER. I SCAN EBAY AUCTIONS ON MY LUNCH BREAK. IT'S THE GUITAR OF THE BLUES, OF GUTHRIE AND DYLAN—AND HOPEFULLY, ONE DAY, ME. I AM OBSESSED.

If anyone could understand my madness, it would be George Gruhn, the man who runs the famous Nashville guitar shop that carries his name. I called him on a Saturday morning and we talked about luthier-choice hardwoods and how all the good-sounding Adirondack Spruces were clear-cut to fight Nazis during World War II. When our conversation finally hit a lull, I muttered an apology for taking up too much of his time. He told me not to sweat it—his night at the Opry hadn't kept him out too late, and he'd already fed the servals.

In case you're not up on your eccentric house pets, servals are 40-pound mini-cheetahs that look like the product of a one-night-stand between an ocelot and a pharaoh hound. I asked Gruhn where he found such an animal, and he rattled off names of a few breeders and websites. From what I can tell, this rare African commodity is being imported to the States more and more all the time, but neither the dealers nor the owners know or care much about where the animals come from.

THE GUITAR COMPENSATED FOR ITS SHAGGY PEDIGREE BY SIMPLY BEING ITSELF: A DARK, WARM AND COMPLICATED AMERICAN WITH A SKETCHY PAST AND AN EVEN MORE COMPLICATED PRESENT.

IT WAS ONE OF US.

We like to think our prized possessions have biographies that reflect our values. But let's be honest: Questioning the origin of a specifies isn't a popular pastime, whether it's a wild cat or a musical instrument. And that's where I find myself with the J-45. Last fall, allegations arose that Gibson had been harvesting wood for its acoustics from endangered forests, flying in the face of U.S. law and years of promises from the company itself. Now I'm not just obsessed—I'm haunted.

1942 wasn't a great year to be in the acoustic guitar business. The country was in its second year of a World War, and when your industry depends on timber and metal to survive, and when those happen to be the same components of airplanes and guns, guess who's left holding the ration card? To add insult to injury, most of the people in their 20s and 30s who would buy a casual instrument were overseas—and so was 90 percent of Gibson's guitar-making staff. With all the young bucks and good wood out of the picture, the new products were designed by the most experienced craftsman working with limited resources. The chances of something worthwhile coming out of those circumstances were slim. But despite everything, Gibson decided to introduce a brand-new flattop. They called it the J-45.

Behold a dark horse: It was a 16-inch, round-shouldered dreadnought with a sunburst finish. With smaller guitars storming the market, the J-45 was Gibson's attempt to make a cheaper, svelter version of its classic Southern Jumbo—something to appeal to the plumbers and cattle ranchers that drooled over Martin D-28s, but couldn't justify buying one. Gibson cobbled together a new, affordable guitar with what they had around the shop. Due to wartime rations, they used up to four pieces of spruce to make the tops. Since the look of a hardwood floor isn't especially appealing on stringed instruments, craftsmen used a dark stain to apologize for the extra planks. But few who bought the new guitar noticed or cared: The price was right, and in a country where you couldn't buy a pound of sugar without paperwork, the J-45 became a bestseller.

It became known as The Workhorse because it was the sturdy "everyman's guitar" of the Gibson line. From 1942 to 1946, the J-45 nearly tripled sales of Martin's competitor. In the 1950s and '60s, even after rations were lifted and the economy improved, the J-45 became a standard for people playing coliseums and campfires alike. It had gained a reputation but remained affordable, mostly because it lacked any fancy trimmings—just that dark-stained spruce top, and back and sides hewn from mahogany or rosewood. Then and now, the model was never extravagant or flashy, always appealing to people who saw their guitar as a practical avatar for their lifestyle. This was the Ford F-150 of acoustic guitars: hardworking, dependable, unpretentious.

If the popular Martins of the time sounded like pure adrenaline, the J-45 sounded like warm dirt and sex. It was earthier, with less boom and more sustain. It was a guitar that could moan if you needed it to. That difference shifted the focus away from the high wail of bluegrass stages (where the D-28 reigned supreme) and into smoke-filled blues bars. When the folk boom hit in the '60s, the performers of the time fell into two camps. Singer-songwriter Michael Penn recalls a conversation he had with Joni Mitchell about the split: "She told me there were two kinds of people back then. Those based in traditional English folk usually had a Martin. But those tied to blues always had Gibsons."

The J-45 has been in near-continuous production for more than 65 years, hitting us at the beginning of one war and sticking around on the sidelines of another four. It's entirely possible that the same J-45 could've been played by someone who shot the SS in one conflict and then, a generation later, slung over the shoulder of a kid protesting another. The guitar grew up with America, following us from blues to the Beatles to Bowie. Buddy Holly loved his. So did Piedmont bluesman John Jackson, who played the natural-finish version. Bob Dylan breathed new life into the acoustic singer/songwriter scene with his J-45; more recently, the guitar has popped up in the arms of artists as unexpected as Green Day and Hannah Montana. Wilco frontman Jeff Tweedy says it was the first decent guitar he ever owned, and his 1957 J-45 can be heard in every song on *A Ghost is Born*. When I asked him why he still performs with one, he replied frankly: "If there was one tool every singer/songwriter should have, it would be the J-45."

Tweedy also loves what Gibson's master luthier, Ren Ferguson, calls the "Ghost of Gibson"—that distinct tone you can only hear on these guitars in person. It's that rich, full sound that fills a room when Gibson acoustics are played

live and makes you wish you were on your third shot and someone else was driving. Folks swear it cannot be recorded, video-taped or reproduced in any way.

Singer/songwriter Aimee Mann bought her first J-45 after a car crash claimed her old J-160, and she hasn't turned back since. When I ased her what made her choose the J-45, she said she wanted a guitar that not only sounded right, but *felt* right. "It's a very personal thing," she told me. "...You want to play a guitar that's an extension of you."

When you lift the J-45 into your arms, you're shocked at how solid it feels for a bantamweight. The guitar is surprisingly light; it's clear why spruce was used to make airplanes. The J-45's smaller size, shoulders and childbearing hips make it mildly suggestive—a little sexy, demanding intimacy. You want to sit down to play it. The soft-shouldered body seems to curve perfectly into your own. When you graze your fingers from E to E, you feel the humid notes vibrate against your ribs. They release easily, a drunk and lovely exhalation.

This guitar lacks the ostentation that others famously strut. There aren't any flashy tuners, ornate pick guard designs, or glowing mother-of-pearl merit badges along the neck. The bridge looks like something a boy scout could whittle. The sound hole is as basic as a coffee coaster. This is not a guitar that dresses up and buys you drinks. The J-45 gets to the point.

THE BRIDGE LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING A BOY SCOUT COULD WHITTLE. THE SOUND HOLE IS AS BASIC AS A COFFEE COASTER. THIS IS NOT A GUITAR THAT DRESSES UP AND BUYS YOU DRINKS.

The glory of the J-45 is well-noted, but its troubles less so. In 2003, Gibson CEO Henry Juskiewicz vowed that the company would never manufacture guitars from rare Brazilian rosewood, even going so far as to demand Gibson luthiers at a Montana factory to stop using tainted wood they'd already purchased. In a 2007 interview with *Premier Guitar* magazine, he said, "We want to be part of the solution instead of the problem." The next year, Gibson representatives made a trip to Madagascar, another source of wood, to foster goodwill between the two worlds. It seemed clear that Gibson had realized that being environmentally-minded was not only good for forest ecology, but—in an ever-greening economy—good for business, too.

But in November 2009, the Gibson Corporation was raided by the U.S. government under allegations that the company had used endangered hardwoods from Madagascar to build its high-end acoustics, including the J-45. Federal agents from the Fish and Wildlife Service crashed into the Nashville offices and seized wood, files, computers and guitars. The allegation was a violation of the Lacey Act, the U.S. law—and first law worldwide—that protects endangered animals and plants, including forests. Gibson hasn't yet been charged, but the company is cooperating with the investigation. Following the raid, Juszkiewicz stepped down from his board membership with the Rainforest Alliance, a position he'd held for 15 years; requests to interview him for this article were denied.

"I was stunned," says Scott Paul, the director of Greenpeace's Forest Campaign, of his reaction to news of the raid. Paul worked directly with Gibson in 2007 on the Love Your Wood campaign, for which a number of guitar companies—including Gibson—pledged to exclusively use woods approved by the nonprofit Forest Stewardship Council. "I personally believe if they are proven guilty, all they really need to do is deal with the issue," Paul says. "In my heart, I don't think that [violating the Lacey Act] was their intention." He explained that the raid wasn't about guitars in particular—it was about Madagascar and the lack of proper regulation in the modern logging industry. The Feds could have just as easily traced the bane hardwoods back to coffee tables or humidors, but they didn't.

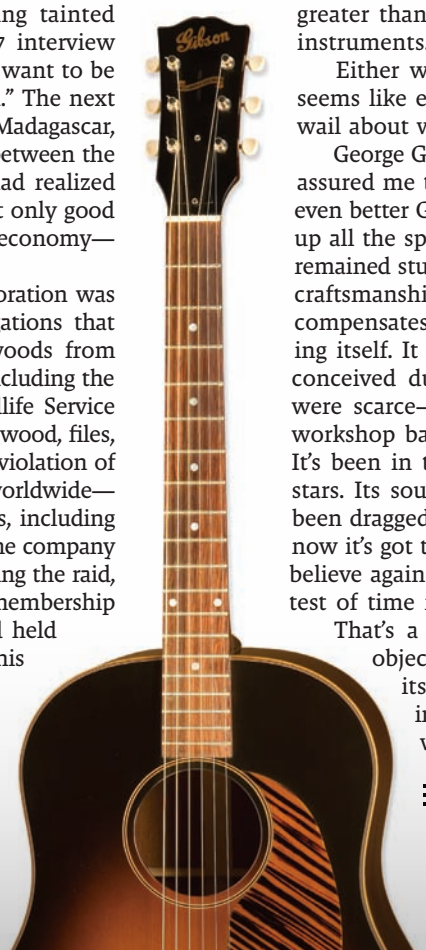
I asked head luthier Ren Ferguson if he thought the investigation had done anything to tarnish the workhorse's reputation. After all, Gibson has provided instruments for some of the scrappiest musicians of the last 100 years; J-45s were in the laps of Dylan, Donavan and Guthrie, artists that championed progress, peace and hope—not tree-rape and corporate corruption. But Ferguson demurred. "No," he said. "I don't think so at all." Gibson makes guitars, he explained, not foreign policy—and they have to trust their chain of suppliers. "We just order the wood."

Environmental activists and fossa fans alike are paying close attention to the situation as it continues to unfold. Greenpeace's Paul says the raid was unfortunate for Gibson, but that it was an example that needed to be made; if the Lacey Act, the only law on the books protecting endangered forests, isn't being enforced, the loss could be far greater than a guitar-maker's reputation and a few instruments.

Either way, for whoever's on the losing end, it seems like exactly the kind of hard luck one might wail about while playing a J-45.

George Gruhn, he of the domesticated jungle cats, assured me that there are better guitars out there—even better Gibsons. Like a good salesman, he offered up all the specs to back it up. I listened politely but remained stubbornly enamored; this affair isn't about craftsmanship, it's about raw attraction. The guitar compensates for its shaggy pedigree by simply being itself. It was born a scrapwood-bastard prodigy, conceived during an atrocious war when supplies were scarce—but what came out of that Michigan workshop back in the '40s has evolved into legend. It's been in the hands of soldiers, hippies and rock stars. Its sound is dark, warm and complicated. It's been dragged through our sloppy, selfish history and now it's got the Feds on its back. It made some of us believe again in love at first sight, and has stood the test of time regardless of the constant competition.

That's a hell of a biography for an inanimate object. The J-45 has long been identified by its signature black stain. As the Gibson investigation unfolds, let's hope it doesn't wind up with another. *Fin*



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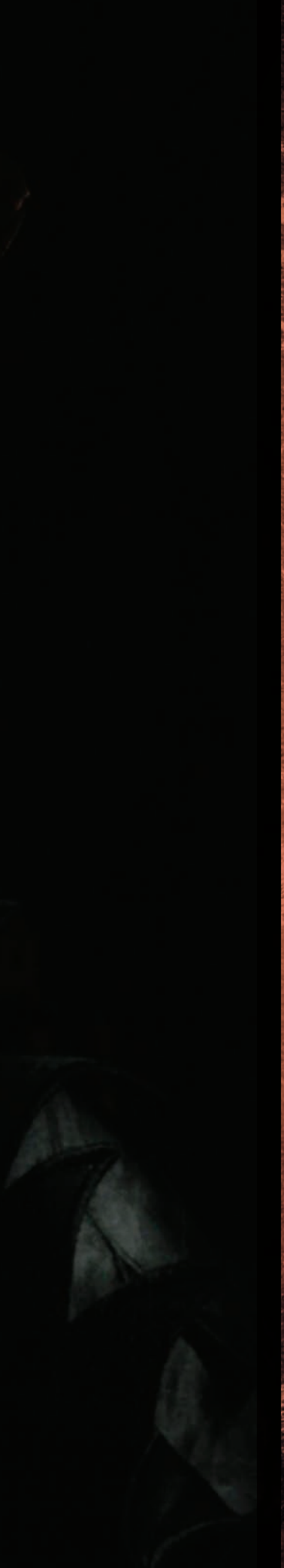


THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING JÓNSI

WITH HIS ACCLAIMED BAND SIGUR RÓS ON INDEFINITE HIATUS, THE MAN WITH THE MOST TRANSCENDENT VOICE IN POPULAR MUSIC SUMMONS THE COURAGE TO STEP OUT ON HIS OWN.

BY JASON KILLINGSWORTH PHOTOGRAPHY BY LILJA BIRGISDOTTIR

OF *THE FOUR PEACOCKS ONSTAGE AT THIS JANUARY AFTERNOON'S PRIVATE CONCERT TAPING IN THE EAST LONDON NEIGHBORHOOD OF BETHNAL GREEN, ONLY TWO HOLD THE DISTINCTION OF BEING ACTUAL BIRDS. PEACOCK #3 HAS A UKULELE DRAPED OVER HIS SLIGHT FRAME; HIS SIGNATURE FAUX-HAWK FORMS A SLENDER, LIGHT-BROWN RIDGE DOWN HIS SCALP. HIS GIVEN NAME IS JÓN ÞÓR BIRGISSON, BUT EVERYONE CALLS HIM JÓNSI.*

JÓNSI IS THE LEAD SINGER FOR POST-ROCK DARLINGS SIGUR RÓS, THE MOST POPULAR BAND ICELAND HAS EVER PRODUCED. TODAY HE'S COSTUMED IN A LEATHER-AND-CLOTH SASH, VARIOUSLY PATTERNED FEATHERS, A FURRY SHOULDER HARNESS AND MILITARY-ISSUE PANTS WITH A NARROW STRIPE ALONG THE OUTER SEAMS; PINK MAKEUP BURSTS ACROSS HIS TEMPLES. THE LOOK IS 85 PERCENT PETER PAN *LOST BOY, 15 PERCENT CIRCA-1983 CYNDI LAUPER.*

Peacock #4 is Nico Muhly, who sits with unusually good posture behind the club's ratty piano. Since graduating from New York City's Juilliard School six years ago with a masters in music, Muhly has straddled the classical and pop divide, scoring 2008 Best Picture nominee *The Reader* and collaborating with artists like Grizzly Bear, Björk and Bonnie "Prince" Billy. The tight cluster of crimson feathers pinned above his left ear looks like a seeping head wound.

Peacocks #1 and #2 huddle near the lip of the stage, heads bobbing imperceptibly like a pair of squat, overdressed security guards as Jónsi and Muhly plunge into the first song, "Go Do," the lead track from *Go*, Jónsi's new solo album. Despite the song's cheerful, mid-tempo bounce, the birds remain calm, unfazed by the music. Well, mostly unfazed.

After the song's final chord fades, Muhly pipes up: "That peacock just shat! FYI, in the department of things that have just happened!" The dozen or so people in the room fall over laughing. And then the show goes on, starting again from the top. These artists are pros; they've all made peace with a world where monitors feed back, guitar strings break and on-stage peacocks take foul-smelling dumps near your feet.

Despite Muhly's outsized creative investment in *Go* (virtuosic piano playing; scoring all the string, brass and woodwind arrangements; hiring his own session players; conducting the in-studio orchestra, etc.) his busy classical-performance schedule will make it virtually impossible to take part in Jónsi's spring tour. "In the rock world, people are booking tours for March now," Muhly says. "Whereas in my universe, I'm literally talking about March 2015 now. For instance, last night I had a show in Eindhoven in Holland, and I've known about it since 2008. The date just arrives and you have to get to Eindhoven somehow. It's an odd life." This afternoon's attempt to document the pair's exquisite musical chemistry is thanks only to a rare planetary alignment that allowed their schedules to converge in the same room at the same time.

It's instructive to watch Jónsi work in a situation like this. Today's four-song performance will be edited together later, which gives the proceedings a studio quality. Following one of the "Go Do" takes, Jónsi gently directs Muhly to be less strident with his piano entry coming out of a quieter passage. Later, when Jónsi flubs the initial take of "Boy Lilikoi," inadvertently skipping the entire bridge, Muhly laughs and ribs him with a playful, "You suck." Each tune is played numerous times and the two vary their musical ideas subtly with each pass. When I sit down with Muhly after the taping, he will describe arranging songs as precisely this sort of iterative give-and-take, albeit in "slow motion, over the course of several hours."

Jónsi's stoic onstage demeanor and spindly build might foster the perception of him as a timid pushover but good luck bullying the man. The afternoon's final selection is a gorgeous ballad he wrote 10 years ago called "Still Water," which didn't make *Go*'s final cut. The song packs a number of tricky syncopated passages and Jónsi is having trouble nailing the lot. Roughly four minutes into the piece, he misses a chord change and stops in frustration. He starts again. Several minutes pass before the take is derailed by another small error. After the third attempt comes up short, the director of the film crew starts getting testy, saying his staff needs to call it a day. Jónsi rebuffs the protest by calmly counting off another pass at the tune. He refuses to acquiesce until he gets it perfect. And eventually he does.

The venue for today's taping, The Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, mirrors the playfulness of *Go*'s more exuberant cuts. The club's website greets you with the hyphen-happy exclamation: *"Blimey! We're an east-end party-house, love!"* A series of photographs lining the walls depict blue-collar Joes on a fishing trip, holding aloft their scaly trophies. A neglected video-gambling machine called Take Note waits patiently for the bar's regular clientele to return. The stage dressing appears to be modeled after a '70s dating game show—a shimmery tinsel backdrop and a massive red heart dotted with glowing white bulbs that could have been nicked from a Vegas wedding chapel. Someone even plugged in the electronic bingo caller, which hangs on "55," as if the number held some kind of Adamsian universe-unlocking significance.

Tinsel. Live animal props. Dress-up. Kitschy London piano bars. This is how the skinny dude from Sigur Rós goes about dismantling, brick by stoic brick, the perceived Great Wall of Self-Seriousness encircling his band's frequently austere music. The sonorous organ hum, 13-minute tracks and wraith-like vocal cascades of Sigur Rós' mystifyingly-titled *( )* album seem a zillion miles away when you watch Jónsi plucking his ukulele and singing flowery, life-affirming sentiments in clear English. Welcome to the opposite of opacity. Give your eyes a moment to adjust.

If some longtime fans are disappointed, it's only because they crave the inscrutability, the self-delusion that Sigur Rós's music arrived from some exotic domain further away than a mere plane flight. The music's geographical origin—a remote volcanic island peeking out of the frigid North Atlantic, with a rep for spawning deliciously subversive pop—injected the band's persona with a heady dose of exoticism. Like an overnight snowfall, the music's stark atmospherics offered a supple emotional canvas, inviting listeners to leave their own distinct, shoe-print sketches. But considering the hopped-up percussion assault of 2008 album *Með suð í eyrum við spilum endalaust*'s lead single "Gobbledigook" and the band's pop acumen evident on tracks such as the spiraling "Hoppípolla" (from 2006's *Takk*), whatever snow happens to be left on the ground is melting fast.

The world will have to wait a bit longer to see where the band goes next. Jónsi went on record in late January saying they had begun recording material for a new record but subsequently "chucked it all away." When I spoke to Sigur Rós' sound engineer Birgir "Biggí" Jón Birgisson, his assessment of the situation was far more optimistic: "We did a session in May of '09 that wasn't discarded, it's just on hold. The band wanted to see how far they would get in one month and there were a few songs that got pretty far, but we'll see in a few years what they might use, if anything, whenever they start working again.

"But it was definitely a new direction—more electronic," he continues. "They were trying out different things with samples and manipulating sound and drum machines and stuff like that. So it was definitely not as acoustic as the last album. I got the impression they felt like, 'OK, we did the acoustic album, let's do something totally different.' And we were also working with recordings we did a couple of years ago in London with a choir. They were meant to be on *Takk*, but they were trying to fit them in and see how they would sound. So the recordings were really diverse, from choirs and stuff like that to really beat-oriented, electronic stuff."

If anything's getting chucked this year, it's the idea of Jónsi as a morose, super-sober artiste. His good friend, Kristín Björk Kristjánsdóttir, who recently relocated from Reykjavík to Berlin and performs offbeat folktronica under the moniker Kira Kira, puts it this way: "He possesses a certain light and joyous drive that's very inspiring. I remember a long time ago before I shook off my stage fright, I had a show in Berlin and I was really, really nervous. I put on some Sigur Rós, jumped up and down for 15 minutes and then I was good to go. Jónsi is very brave and, I don't know, it's easy to get smitten by the joy he spreads."

Kristjánsdóttir says Jónsi always wrote music alone in his room during the time they shared an apartment in 2001, but he wasn't ready to show it to anybody—they weren't Sigur Ros songs, they were his own. Then, in 2004, she invited him to perform at the fifth anniversary celebration of Kitchen Motors, an organization she co-founded to promote cross-pollination between divergent Icelandic artists. (Par for the course in Iceland, she hosted the 12-hour shindig in an old Reykjavík netting factory.)

"I think that was the first time he ever played his solo music. He got a few other musicians to play with him and they all wore beautiful marching-band costumes. He designed these amazing butterfly wings for everyone and wrote a beautiful birthday song for Kitchen Motors, which he performed for the first and only time with a 20-girl children's choir. We got lights and we put them where their hearts are, and when the concert started, Jónsi led everyone marching into the venue at the front. If I remember correctly, he had an old marching-band drum. The music he played that night was beautiful, though much more ambient back in the day than it is now."

It's hard to listen to Kristjánsdóttir's description of that maiden Jónsi solo gig without thinking of him as the young, blond-haired boy in Sigur Rós' "Glósóli" video, pounding away on his toy bass drum, charming a throng of children into joining his ragtag parade. Some things never change: when Jónsi set to work on his first solo album, he began the exact same way—rallying new and old friends to his side in hopes of unearthing a bit of fresh magic.

Since opening in the fall of 1999, producer Peter Katis' Tarquin Studios in Bridgeport, Conn. has hosted a stampede of great bands, including The National, Interpol, The Swell Season and Frightened Rabbit. In late 2008 it was Jónsi's turn to reach out to Katis. He'd been impressed by the work the producer had done for London folk-pop sextet Fanfarlo, and an indefinite Sigur Rós hiatus had been prompted by three bandmates parenting new babies. Jónsi decided to take advantage of the resulting downtime by collecting the songs he'd written over the years that hadn't made sense for the band; he envisioned a low-key acoustic album and had his heart set on recording the project at Tarquin.

At least one part of that vision came to pass. The following spring, in April of 2009, Jónsi and his boyfriend/collaborator

JÓNSI

MAY BE SCARED TO DEATH OF HEIGHTS. HE MAY STRUGGLE WITH INSECURITY WHEN RECORDING MUSIC OUTSIDE THE CONFINES OF HIS BAND OF 16 YEARS. BUT, IN PERFECT ACCORDANCE WITH THE SENTIMENT OF "GO DO," HIS SOLO ALBUM'S LEAD SINGLE, HE GOES; HE DOES.

Alex Somers (with whom he created the instrumental album *Riceboy Sleeps*) showed up on Katis' doorstep and began the initial tracking phase of *Go*. During that first week, Jónsi and Somers laid down acoustic guitar beds and scratch vocals—and then Finnish drummer and Múm collaborator Samuli Kosminen arrived and kicked the notion of a quiet, intimate record to the curb.

Instead of playing a standard drum kit, Kosminen wanted to explore more exotic forms of percussion. On Jónsi's website there's a behind-the-scenes video of Kosminen in the studio, alternately stomping and slapping out rhythms on a blue plastic suitcase. It's easy to imagine airport baggage handlers using it as a training video on how to inflict maximum damage to people's belongings. "[Recording Kosminen's drum parts] was when the album began to get bigger and more amazing than we thought it would," Katis says, taking a few minutes away from finishing The National's new record to catch up by phone. "Samuli's playing made it so much busier and we just went crazy. We didn't show a lot of restraint as far as production. But instead of a horrible mess, it turned out to be something pretty exciting."

In the hyperactive romp of "Animal Arithmetic," you can sense a delirious fever in Kosminen's drumming that picks up the tribal throwdown of "Gobbledigook" and drives it clear off the reservation with breakneck abandon. But if Kosminen was Dr. Seuss's Thing One, showing up to the tidy house of Jónsi's acoustic record and causing all sorts of thrilling mischief, you've already met Thing Two.

Nico Muhly had been working with Jónsi on arrangements for the record long before he ever set foot in Tarquin Studios. He was staying in Iceland when the rough songs first popped into his inbox; it was the middle of the night and Muhly planned to start working on arrangements the following morning, but after listening to the first track, "Boy Lilikoi," he knew exactly what he wanted to do with it. He stayed up all night cranking out the first demo.

"It was like these crazy woodwinds and all this stuff and it was completely insane," Muhly recalls, turning giddy all over again as he describes the experience. "I was at the studio in Iceland with 15 midi tracks of piccolo in Logic, just kind of freaking out. I sent it to Jónsi and I was like, the next email I get from him is either gonna be like *you're so fired* or he's gonna be like *this is great*. And he sent me this rapturous email, like 'Yes! That's great!'

"No one ever lets you get away with all that shit," Muhly goes on. "So for me that was exciting because it opened up the world of the album for me and made everything much more possible. Some of the really sweeping [arrangements on the record], I wouldn't have dared be so free."

When Muhly finally joined the other musicians in Connecticut, he had a huge amount of work to do in a narrow window of time. But thanks to his background in conducting sessions for film music ("where every second is like $8,000," Muhly winces), he managed to finish well ahead of schedule, knocking out the recording in just three hectic days. Katis was impressed by Muhly's work ethic but also with his flexibility and the lack of preciousness in his material: "You could say, 'Nico, what about this arrangement, blah, blah, blah?' and he'd say, 'Give me 10 minutes' and he'd run out and come back with new scores. He went through two ink cartridges in my printer. He owes me."

After the whirlwind of April, everybody adjourned until September, when Jónsi and Somers returned to Bridgeport and spent a solid month with Katis, perfecting the vocals and determining exactly what sonic treatment to give the album's stockpile of recorded material. Even though the record has exuberance to spare—Jónsi joked with one reporter that the propulsively upbeat cut "Around Us" could be a gay club anthem—there's virtually no sequencing whatsoever.

"It's shocking how few tricks there are on this record," stresses Katis. "You just watch Jónsi sing, thinking to yourself, 'Wow, that really does just come out of him. He really does sing that well.' It's crazy."

After the taping at Bethnal Green, I pile into a taxi with Jónsi and his manager. It's been a hectic afternoon. The singer is ravenous and suggests we hit up his favorite vegan restaurant, Saf, around the corner in Shoreditch (he's been a vegetarian for 13 years and a raw-food vegan for a year now). The restaurant is airy and stylish, full of ultra-modern accoutrements and immaculately polished hardwood floors. No music plays. We slide into a table at the back of the restaurant and chat for a few minutes.

Jónsi is cheery and warm in manner; extending a near-instant rapport long before you feel like you've done anything to earn it. He's enthusiastic and employs the word "cool" with endearing regularity. But despite his most valiant attempts to engage my questions, he can't fully mask his weariness of talking about his music, career and the soon-to-be-released record that will have his name stamped on it; his manager warned me earlier that he'd done at least 80 interviews in the past two weeks alone. Jónsi's replies frequently consist of a brief one-or-two-sentence answer that trails off into vague statements like "So it should be fun," or "So yeah, it was cool," or "We'll just see what happens, you know?"

Over the course of our conversation, he refers several times to the importance of not taking life too seriously ("You're just here, now, doing what you do, and in the end you just die. So you just have to enjoy it while it lasts. And, you know, just have fun.") He underlines how much he hated school growing up ("I don't like the molding that goes on in school, being told you have to learn this and this. That's bullshit! You should just be introduced to lots of things, to be inspired.") He talks about learning to trust his instincts while recording *Go* ("It was kind of scary. Like, is this right? Is it cool? Does this song sound all right? Or is it really bad? You start to doubt yourself, but I think it's healthy.")

The most revealing moment of the interview is, oddly, when I ask him about a little keychain photograph dangling from his backpack. He picked it up as a trophy for surviving a roller coaster during a tour stop in Holland—one of those things where a camera snaps an unflattering photo of you mid-drop, and the image is plastered on trinkets and peddled to you upon exit. Jónsi confesses to being terrified of heights. In fact, he'd never been on a roller coaster before that trip to Holland, but his Sigur Rós bandmates convinced him to join in. "I hated it," Jónsi assures me. "It was ridiculous. I absolutely hated it. Just so scary...the screams, the primal screams out of my belly."

Jónsi may be scared to death of heights. He may struggle with insecurity when recording music outside the confines of his band of 16 years. But, in perfect accordance with the sentiment of "Go Do," his solo album's lead single, he goes; he does. Even when the doing is frightening; even when it's hard work. After he finishes touring behind this record, there are no plans to slow down. "I've never done any sports in my life," he says. "I want to do, like, gymnastics, catapult contests or something. I feel like my body is kind of calling out for movement." *Fin.*

Drawing Blood

BY NEIL FORSYTH | ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW DEGRAFF

AT A PARTY IN COPENHAGEN IN 2005, DANISH AUTHOR KÅRE BLUITGEN WAS HAVING A BEER WITH A JOURNALIST FROM THE DANISH WIRE SERVICE RITZAU. SMALL TALK EXHAUSTED, BLUITGEN MENTIONED AN ISSUE WITH HIS NEW PROJECT, A CHILDREN'S BOOK ABOUT THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD. HE'D WRITTEN THE STORY, BUT COULDN'T FIND AN ILLUSTRATOR WILLING TO DRAW THE REVERED FOUNDER OF ISLAM.

Depictions of the Prophet Muhammad are considered blasphemous by some. Still, it was a kids' book, and would hardly be the first publication to hazard an artistic guess at Muhammad's appearance. But Europe in 2005 was a time of strange forces and new tensions. The previous year had witnessed the Madrid bombings and the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh by an Islamic extremist objecting to Van Gogh's treatment of Islam in his short film *Submission*. In July 2005, London was hit by the 7/7 terrorist attacks and Madrid could not be seen as an aberration.

Denmark, with a Muslim population of 180,000 (out of a total 5.4 million) and no history of serious racial tension, was hardly on the frontline of the War on Terror. Yet the establishment of Islamic extremism in Europe gave the illustrators Bluitgen approached reason enough to turn down the job. The illustrations eventually used in the book came through anonymously.

That night at the party, the journalist listening to Bluitgen heard a story; the next day, he called in a few quotes and sent his article out on the wires. Almost every Danish newspaper picked it up and many, including the popular national *Jyllands-Posten*, ran it on their front page on Sunday, Sept. 17th. The subject arose at the following day's *Jyllands-Posten* editorial meeting. Some wanted to move on, but others wanted to pursue it as an issue of self-censorship and freedom of speech. One reporter suggested asking all of Denmark's prominent illustrators to provide an image of Muhammad and allowing their responses to demonstrate whether or not the hinted-at self-censorship existed. After an internal debate, the reporter's plan was enacted.

FOUR YEARS AFTER A DANISH NEWSPAPER PUBLISHED CARTOONS THAT ENRAGED SECTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC COMMUNITY, THE REPERCUSSIONS CONTINUE. RIOTS HAVE GIVEN WAY TO TERRORIST PLOTS, DEATH THREATS TO AN ATTEMPTED MURDER. THE STORY NOW INVOLVES THE FBI, THE DANISH SECRET SERVICE, A FREE SPEECH DEBATE AND A 74-YEAR-OLD CARTOONIST UNDER CONSTANT LOCKDOWN. ALL THIS FOR 12 LITTLE DRAWINGS.

On Friday, Sept. 30th, the *Jyllands-Posten* printed a dozen cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad alongside an article by cultural editor Flemming Rose explaining the paper's motivations. This was an exercise against dangerous self-censorship, Rose told the readership. The cartoons ranged from gentle to clearly divisive. No one involved in the feature—indeed, no one at all—could have predicted what would happen next.

The day the cartoons were published, Rose received a phone call from a Muslim newspaper vendor. "He'd been to Friday prayers and talked to other Muslim vendors," Rose says, sitting in his cluttered office in the Copenhagen branch of *Jyllands-Posten*. "And together they had decided that they would no longer sell the newspaper because of the cartoons. So that, I guess, was the start."

Rose is 52 years old and looks and talks like the foreign correspondent he was for over a decade. Professorial in bearing, cerebral and soft-spoken, he is dressed casually in a Marlboro Classic shirt and corduroy slacks. He speaks in perfect English across an expanse of desk littered with the tools of his position: journals, magazines, articles for consideration, a Russian dictionary that is perhaps a relic from his posting in Moscow during the 1990s. He also spent time in Washington D.C., Chechnya and Afghanistan before returning to his native Denmark in 2004. "For a quieter job," he says, smiling knowingly.

Rose hadn't been involved in the conception of the cartoon feature, but he eagerly led the project. "It was a classic journalistic exercise," he says. "It was testing a theory. The journalistic principle—don't tell it, show it."

Though some at the paper were worried, Rose felt publishing the cartoons was a timely and necessary decision. His accompanying article touched on a series of related events: the Tate Gallery in London removing a piece of work that included ripped pages of the Qu'ran in the weeks after 7/7, *Submission* writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali fleeing to America, a Swedish gallery removing an artwork that included a quote from the Qu'ran, a prominent Danish commedian declaring he would urinate on the Bible during a live show but would be petrified of doing the same to the Qu'ran. He also mentioned how, after the Danish Prime Minister

met with Islamic leaders to speak about extremism, one of the leaders announced to the press that had told the Prime Minister to force the media to portray Islam more positively.

Cumulatively, for the paper's management, this seemed to be reason enough to explore the issue. Forty illustrators were invited to submit an image representing "Muhammad as he appears to them." Amongst the aging ranks of Denmark's satirical cartoonists, 25 were still actively seeking work. Some didn't think it a worthy project. Others were contracted exclusively to other publications. Just one openly admitted to Rose that he was fearful of participation. In the end, a dozen cartoons came back.

The cartoons varied in style and tone. If you lay aside the notion that depicting Muhammad is, in itself, an insult, only two of the 12 could be seen as incendiary. In one, the Prophet halts a group of suicide bombers with the refrain "Stop, we have run out of virgins." Another cartoon, penned by 70-year-old cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, was a simple image of Muhammad with a lit-fuse bomb planted in his turban.

The first phone call from the newspaper vendor didn't overly concern Rose. "You publish a newspaper, you upset some people," he says. But rumors soon began to circulate about mosques around Denmark organizing themselves against the newspaper. The first protest came a few weeks after the cartoons' publication. "They came down after Friday prayers," Rose says, gesturing to the square outside the newspaper's offices, "Around 3,000."

Still, he wasn't concerned. A debate had started; it was what the paper wanted. There was no particular malice in the radio and television discussions that Rose had shared with local Muslim figures; the demonstration had been largely organized by the Islamic Society of Denmark, and Rose even invited some of their leadership to meet with him.

"They sat and told me that they did not want controversy," he remembers. "They wanted us to debate whether the cartoons should have been printed. I said I understood people being offended, but we had a right to print that was very important and the Danish people agreed. That is what I think was so wrong with what the Islamic Society and others did next. They lost the debate in Denmark so they tried something else. That is where the real problems began. They invited others to join in."

The headquarters of the Islamic Society of Denmark spreads over several low-rise buildings in northwest Copenhagen. Up to 2,000 Muslims gather here for Friday prayers, but today only a few members pass through the narrow corridors. The library's walls are laden with Islamic texts (along with biographies of Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali, and Bob Woodward's *Veil*), but take away the bookcases and leave the conference table, whiteboard and projector, and this could be the boardroom of a local business. It's easy to imagine this room in action in the busy days of fall 2005.

Imran Shah is 34 years old; he's the spokesman for the Islamic Society, and he's late. When he arrives, he apologizes and is effortlessly disarming, talking about his love of the British television survival expert Ray Mears and how he's going to attend one of Mears' adventure courses in rural Wales. Later he will give me a lift to the airport and dole out detailed advice on sore necks. For now he remembers when he first heard of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons.

"I saw them and thought they were unnecessary, but didn't think much more about them," he says with surprising frankness. "But we decided that it would be fair to ask the Minister of Culture for his views on their publication, so we wrote him a letter. He neglected to reply, so we wrote again, and he neglected to reply once again. That is when we began to organize." The Islamic Society coordinated the October demonstration outside the *Jyllands-Posten* offices. "We wanted the Danish government to take us seriously, because the minimum we could expect was a response. We are their citizens, we wanted to know their thoughts. The heat and tension picked up."

Shah counters the suggestion, voiced by Rose and others, that irate Muslims were trampling over principles of free speech that day. Instead, he claims it was more about a public relations failing. "We only wanted to discuss the wisdom of publishing these cartoons, not the right to publish them," he says. "This became lost."

In December 2005, along with other Danish Muslim leaders, representatives from the Islamic Society traveled to Lebanon and Egypt with a dossier including not just the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons but also more grotesque images that depicted Muhammad variously as a pig, a pedophile and engaged in bestiality. (The animal trope is also what allegedly inspired Colleen LaRose, aka Jihad Jane, the recently arraigned Pennsylvania woman accused of plotting to kill a Swedish artist who depicted Muhammad's head on a dog's body.)

"They said they received them in the mail," Rose says of the extra images. "We don't know. The Prophet as a pig was in fact a Photoshop from a French pig festival. They presented these to their counterparts in the Middle East without making any distinction between our cartoons and these new ones."

Shah counters: "These were emails we received. We said clearly that this is an example of the harassment that Muslims face, that this was also what we were experiencing in addition to what was in the papers. We clearly stated this was not from the Danish newspaper."

The images were seized on in their entirety. Shah claims the Islamic Society chose Lebanon and Egypt as moderate countries who they felt could lean politically on the Danish government. But the dossier was passed, reportedly by Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul-Gheit, to more radical Islamic states and the result was predictably convulsive. "People with bad intentions utilized the situation, unfortunately," Shah says.

In January 2006, the conflict boiled over. Saudi Arabia became the first of many countries to recall its Danish ambassador and announce a boycott of Danish companies. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement gave Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes—for Norwegian and Swedish publications had by now also printed the cartoons—48 hours to leave the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades granted Danes and Swedes 72 hours to depart. The first burnings of the Danish flag were spotted in the West Bank, a sight that would soon become commonplace. Danish embassies and EU offices were stormed around the world and, back in Denmark, bomb and death threats began to arrive.

The confusion over the extra images in the dossier split international reaction. Bill Clinton's grave announcement concerning "these totally outrageous cartoons against Islam" typified the initial responses from Western political figures. The *Jyllands-Posten* printed an apology in both Danish and Arabic that regretted not the printing of the cartoons, but hurting the feelings of the Islamic population. Rose went on Al-Jazeera, the dominant television provider to the wider Muslim world; although he began his statement with a further apology, he claims that segment was not translated by the channel. By now, he was working solely on the "emergency situation," liaising with the police and intelligence services and trying to manage the international media's requests. "I was so wiped out and tired," he says. "I couldn't sleep. The whole world wanted to talk to me."

Amidst the mayhem, Rose suggested that the paper print some of the Holocaust cartoons regularly carried by newspapers in certain Islamic countries, particularly Iran. It was a theoretical point that played badly in the press and he was was placed on leave, departing for work in the U.S. until May 2006. "Not my decision," he concedes, "but the right one."

Meanwhile, at the Islamic Society it was all hands on deck. Shah remembers a feeling of disbelief. "Containment, that was our reaction," he recalls. "It had got out of our hands completely."

He says his organization worked to combat any looming extremism amongst their followers. "We were working very closely with the Danish Secret Service to help contain the situation, and we succeeded. Not one single drop of blood was spilled in Denmark, and we considered that a success."

And yet, even once the flag-burning was over, the anger lingered. It became secret, internalized and far more dangerous.

For the past four years, Flemming Rose has led two lives. Within the *Jyllands-Posten* offices he has continued as an editor. Outside work he is a ghost, the man who isn't there, hidden from official record. "Very few people know where I live," he says. "And I have a continual dialogue with the security services."

In late 2007 those security services told Rose they believed there was a plot against him and cartoonist Kurt Westergaard. In February 2008, pre-dawn raids captured a Danish citizen of Morrocan origin and two Tunisians who confessed to having discussed killing Rose and Westergaard, though their plans centered on the elderly cartoonist. Once again Rose was unrepentant, telling the media that "the murder plot against Kurt Westergaard stresses the fact that we are in the middle of a global fight for free speech."

Another year slipped by; another plot was foiled, this time in Chicago. "The media storm of 2006 was terrible," Rose says. "But this was closer [to me]." The FBI arrested a Canadian and an American, both of Pakistani origin, who had allegedly been in contact and receiving training from Islamist groups in Pakistan. The two were reportedly working on a project they called "Mickey Mouse," which aimed to murder Flemming Rose and Kurt Westergaard.

There had already been field trips to Denmark. "They wanted to attack the paper and kill me and Kurt Westergaard. They'd been in touch with Al-Qaeda. That's serious business," Rose says. "They had been shooting videos of the paper and looking in phone books to try to find me. They had gone to the Jewish synagogue because they thought I was Jewish."

From the beginning, Rose had heeded the security services' every warning. Meanwhile, Westergaard tried to mediate his own story. In the early months of the furor, he invited Muslim leaders to his home, a gesture shown on national television. He has done further television interviews, letting reporters into his fortified suburban residence. "Every fool in Denmark," Rose says, "knows where he lives."

The Danish city of Aarhus is three hours' drive from Copenhagen on the eastern coast of the Jutland peninsula. The February temperature stays resolutely sub-freezing and the city's harbour has been swallowed by ice. At the police station, Chief Superintendent Ole Madsen and his deputy Frits Kjeldsen offer pastries and a bemused air. Madsen looks me up on the Internet, "just to check," and throughout our interview he politely deems some questions "too sensitive."

His caution is understandable. The last Danish case that Madsen can remember receiving international media attention was a 2004 blaze at a fireworks factory. Last year Aarhus had just five homicides; this year, the city had an attempted murder that led news reports around the globe.

Kjeldsen relates the events of New Year's Day 2010: "The accused found his way to Kurt Westergaard's house. He brought an axe and a knife. When he got inside he tried to attack, but Westergaard ran to his security room. The accused left the house and the police came. He attacked the police with a knife and an axe and was shot in the knee and the hand."

These are the only details the Danish police have released. Yet it quickly became public that Westergaard's granddaughter was also in his home and that the illustrator had made the brutal choice of escaping alone to his security room. Fortunately, the girl was entirely unharmed. Danish press knows the identity of the 28-year-old Somali who's accused of the attack; he has lived in Denmark for the past 15 years, but his identity is protected under the Danish legal system. The country's intelligence chief has revealed the attacker's links to Al-Shabaab, a Somali terror group, as well as to Al-Qaeda leaders in East Africa. And in the wake of the attack an Al-Shabab spokesman declared that the group members "appreciate the incident in which a Muslim Somali boy attacked the devil who abused our Prophet."

After all the riots, threats, plots and arrests, this was different—it was personal and immediately violent. Flemming Rose remembers finding it "terrifying." Shah describes it as "truly terrible."

A short walk from the police station through the streets of Aarhus is the Town Hall, where the Mayor Nicolai Wammen sits in a corner office. The mayor regularly meets with Westergaard and received him for lunch shortly after the attack. "He was in good spirits," Wammen recalls. "Of course he is angry that he should be the subject of so much hatred and for the attack made on him and his family. But he is a strong man with a sense of humor and that gets him and his family through this."

Westergaard is now under 24-hour police protection—according to Wammen, "A very good decision." Deputy Kjeldsen says the joint operation between the Aarhus police and Secret Serveice "has been tightened up."

Throughout all of these conversations, Westergaard has remained a spectral presence. Rose didn't know him before the cartoons were comissioned, and speaks only rarely to him now. The *Jyllands-Posten* had been chilly on my approach to talk to him, and a BBC journalist who interviewed him before the recent attacks had said Westergaard speaks only with close friends in the media. Yet when an assistant at the Aarhus mayor's office passed my details on to him, I received an email a few days later with a phone number.

Westergaard's voice was faint and loaded with his 74 years, and his English sometimes slipped, but hearing him speak was a moving experience. "It was one of the worst days of my life," he says of January 1st. "We had been briefed, my family, that the terrorists would never harm anyone but me, so I had to run to the safety room to call the police. My grandchild was in the living room. The choice was to be slaughtered in front of her eyes."

Like Rose, Westergaard sees the publication of the cartoons and the subsequent defense of that publication as a vital demonstration of free speech. "We had to go through this discussion in Denmark about freedom of speech," he says, "and if it hadn't been for these cartoons something else would have provoked it. I think it has been very necessary for Denmark to have this discussion."

He describes his initial submission of the cartoon as "just another day at the office," and decries how Denmark's image has suffered abroad over the last five years. "The cartoons slipped out of our control and were used to stir up an opinion about Denmark as a racist country. But Denmark is not like that. This country is kind and peaceful, and now we have lost our international innocence."

Westergaard has lost more than that—both he and Rose live under a threat of death that is jarringly real. "I would say it is getting worse," Rose told me. Westergaard agrees: "It feels like it has all started again." Since January, he has never been without close protection. "If people invite me to dinner, they must just plan for two more," he jokes. "I am nearly 75. Not for me will it ever be over. But I can keep my life almost normal. I am OK." *Fin*

FEEDING *the* monster

BY JOSH RITTER

AS HE PREPARES TO RELEASE HIS NEW ALBUM, *SO RUNS THE WORLD AWAY,* ONE OF OUR FAVORITE SONGWRITERS OPENS UP ABOUT HIS ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

For hours I'd been lying awake in the dark, listening to the garbage trucks trawl the neighborhood. Occasionally a ship would blow its horn over in Red Hook, and I'd wonder again what it must be like out there on the ocean in one of those cold, steel boats. For the last year I'd been playing music in all weathers, all over the world.

Now it was early spring and I was home in Brooklyn, sung out from performing, wrung out from jet lag and bone-tired in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. Most importantly, I didn't have a single new song. The year had been the busiest of my life, and I hadn't built in much time for versifying. And versifying takes real time if you want to do it right. Not having put pen to page for quite a while, and with recording sessions planned and coming up quickly, I wondered if the songs would come easily. I suspected they wouldn't, but hoped that I'd been feeding the monster well enough that it would let me have a few to get started on a new album.

The monster is the invisible force that decides what you write about. Some people call it "The Muse," but I've never found that to be a particularly apt description for a creature so voracious. This is no gossamer-clad maiden. I don't know much about it, but I know that it lives deep in the synaptic jungle, its tail twitching lazily, its slow-breathing bulk heaving sulfurous sighs as it waits. You have to feed the monster everything you come across, be it books, music or movies, your friends and enemies and any other shiny baubles you find strewn in your path. You shovel everything you've got—a long-handled snow shovel works best—into its big toothy mouth, and it chews everything up and sighs once again. It never says "thank you," and you don't expect any gratitude, but once in a while the monster will taste something it really enjoys. When it does, you'll notice a slight lift of its scaly brow and a narrowing of its keyhole pupils. It doesn't give away much, but if you know your monster, that's all you need to see.

Now your job really begins. This part is fun—you go and find everything you can find that relates to the monster's favorite new food. You bring it full wheelbarrows of *Barton Fink*, Steve Martin, nachos, Myrna Loy, the game of Life, Dire Straits, jungle gyms, whatever. You never question the monster's taste. If it wants Louis L'Amour, for God's sake give it Louis L'Amour. If you don't give the monster what it wants, the damned S.O.B. will never give you anything in return. But if you do a good job feeding your monster, it'll occasionally let you have a little inspiration. In my case, that means the idea for a song.

The radiator began to crank and clack. Steam whistled into the room like smoke from a dozing dragon. Since I'd gotten home a week earlier, my monster seemed to be on a steady diet of four things: Muriel Spark, Barbara Tuchman, Alfred Deller and Jeri Southern. Spark and Tuchman were authors and Deller and Southern were vocalists. I had no idea what the four had in common, but I knew enough not to ask.

Muriel Spark was born in Edinburgh in 1918, during the waning days of the Great War. Her father was Jewish and her mother English, and Muriel matured into a permanent outsider with powers of observation and description that could decode the crook of an elbow and the shift of a glance. She was funny in a genuinely wicked way. I pity the characters that were born into her intricate, often surreal little plots. Dougal Douglas, the central character in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, believes he's turning into a devil. Jean Brodie, the teacher and ingénue of a clutch of school girls, is a fascist carrying on a love affair with an artist, who, in turn, carries on an affair with one of her prized students. With childlike glee, Spark smashes her characters into each other, as though constructing a beautiful dollhouse and then setting it on fire. Her attitude towards her characters is both malevolent and just; they all get exactly the fate they deserve. After finishing Spark's amazing *Loitering With Intent*, I thought about how I would have liked to know her but was somewhat relieved I'd never gotten the chance.

Loitering with Intent was back on the bookshelf now, replaced on the nightstand by Barbara Tuchman's *The Proud Tower*, about the quarter-century before the outbreak of World War I. For awhile, I had been picking it up and reading a page here and there, but of late the book, with its ornate sense of foreboding, had become very important to my monster. In a collection of essays, Tuchman described the years when the world was wracked by the death throes of the 19th century and the birth pangs of the 20th; a self-taught historian, she (like Spark) had a keen eye for those innocents who were headed for a cliff. Among other topics, *The Proud Tower* tells the stories of the decaying and flaccid European aristoc-

Photo by Sam Kassler

racy, the contentious, often viperous socialist and anarchist movements, and the beautiful and doomed cultural flowerings of pre-war Germany. The whole world was painted here, in the instant before it plunged from its own ramparts. Barbara Tuchman's book was tense and heartbreaking, and that's what my monster wanted.

I'd been listening to music only rarely. So little held real appeal or made me feel compelled to listen again—certainly few rockers or songwriters. The only folks I kept coming back to were Alfred Deller and Jeri Southern. Like Tuchman, Deller was born in the last few months before the Great War. He was born in Kent, England, and possessed a beautiful, remarkably high voice. In the years after the courtly fashion of castrating silver-voiced young men fell out of favor, much of the choral music written for *castrati* had only been sung by boys who hadn't completed puberty or the very few men, known as *countertenors,* whose voices didn't break after they reached maturity. Deller, born in an age that eschewed the knife, sang in the choirs of St. Paul's and Canterbury Cathedrals and then went on to become the main proponent and re-populizer of the countertenor voice. I had his HMV recordings and listened to them incessantly. Songs like "Peg-a-Ramsay" and "O Rosa Bella," made me feel like I was walking through some Dorset field that never existed. First, there was his voice, androgynous and pure; then the instruments, apparently miked far behind him, with their strains combed into Martian drones, making his voice sound all the more ethereal.

I could totally understand why the monster wanted Alfred Deller. I'd been swamped with all kinds of music for years. A lot of it was terrible—cynically written and cynically performed. Deller performed songs from as far back as the 1400s, songs that thrived on their own merits, untouched by marketing and radio campaigns. For these reasons, and because I loved listening to him so much, I was happy to throw Deller to the monster.

Much more perplexing to me was the monster's love for Jeri Southern. Lying in bed, I tried to remember the first time I'd heard her. It was recently, but that's all I could recall. Like some of the best people in life, she was just there all of a sudden, a friend I felt I'd known for years. Southern was born in 1926 in Royal, Nebraska. She sang plainly. She made standards like "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" and "The Very Thought of You" feel as if they had been written just for her. She didn't seem as if she was trying to impress; she was only trying to tell a story. My favorite song of the moment was "All in Fun" by Kern and Hammerstein, which she sang slowly, with a trace of fun and large dose of fatalism:

We are seen around New York
El Morocco and The Stork
Other stay-up-late cafés
I am on the town with you these days
And that's the way it stands...

Just a fellow and a girl
We have had a little whirl
Our feet have left the ground a bit
We've played around a bit
And that's the way it stands....

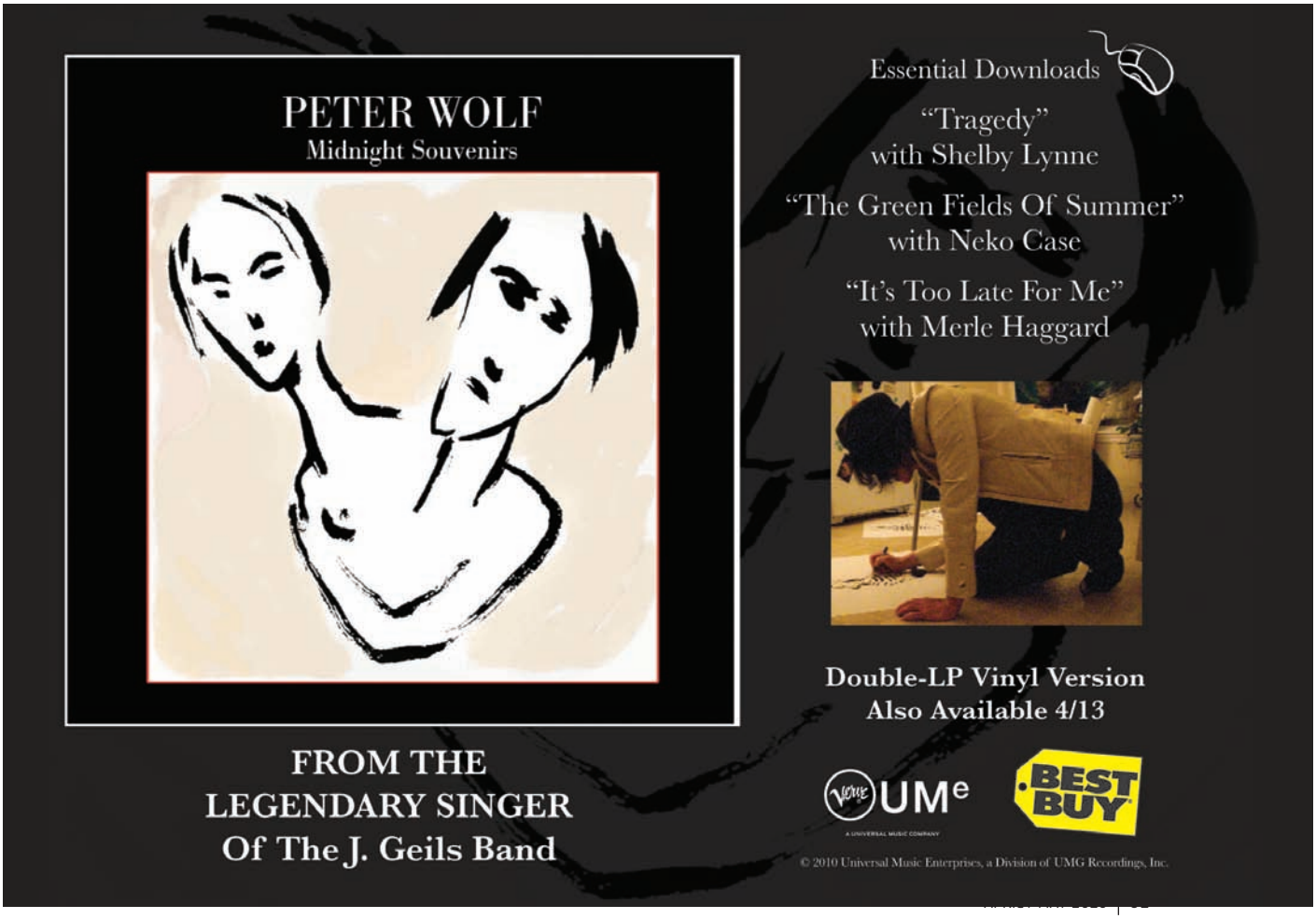
I'd gone so far as to record versions of "You Better Go Now" and "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" based on Southern's interpretations. I wasn't going to release them; I just felt it was necessary to record them to keep the monster happy.

Of the four artists, I noted that none of them were songwriters. This came as no surprise. But I thought about how funny it was that people seem to believe only a songwriter can inspire another songwriter, or only a novelist can inspire another novelist. Two of the people I fed the monster each day were American, one was Scottish and the other English. Three were born around the time of the War. There was no telling why any of this stuff was important, or even if it was. I was too busy trying to keep my monster well-fed to ponder why it wanted what it wanted.

By now, true darkness was falling. I lay in the bed, looking up at the ceiling. A song came into my mind. It's tempting to say out of nowhere, but I know where it came from. I got up quietly, made my way across the creaky old boards to the bathroom and shut the door. I sat on the edge of the bathtub and wrote and wrote, trying to get down on paper as much of the song as I could in that quiet moment of reverie. In the morning I'd be feeding the monster again, and this magical moment would be gone.

The song was about an Egyptian mummy who seduces and betrays an Egyptologist. And I wrote it in waltz time—a graceful Straussian cadence that suffused the years before the First World War. I liked the tempo because it felt decadent. I wanted the mummy to feel the excitement of coming back to life. I wanted the woman to suspect her mummy is cursed, but to be so full of love for him that she is blinded to her own catastrophic fate. While the tempo and the time signature felt like Tuchman's *Proud Tower*, the actions of the characters felt to me very much like Spark. I sang the song in a higher register than I would normally choose, probably due to my appetite for Deller at the time, and I set the story in New York City because I liked the idea of the two lovers waltzing their way from one stay-up-late-café to the next. The song was far from done when I put my guitar down and closed the notebook, but I felt grateful to my greedy monster and went back to bed knowing that whatever parts of the song weren't written yet would still be there in the morning. Over the next several days I worked hard on the song, sharpening and softening the story. Several months later, as October snow began to fall and stick, I recorded the finished version of the song, which I'd entitled "The Curse," at Great North Sound Studios in Parsonsfield, Maine. It's now on my new album, *So Runs the World Away*.

This is, of course, far too simple a way to explain where a song comes from, but it's as close as I want to get to the monster. We have a reasonable relationship, he and I, and I'd rather keep it that way. Songs can't be explained, and they shouldn't have to be. A well-written song should be able to speak for itself, as Jeri Southern well knew. Still, it's a marvelous, mysterious process, and one of the fascinations we have with any artist is the chance, perhaps, to get a fleeting glimpse of someone else's monster. The most frequent question I am asked in interviews is, "What are your inspirations?" On rare occasions, I tell the truth. *Fin*

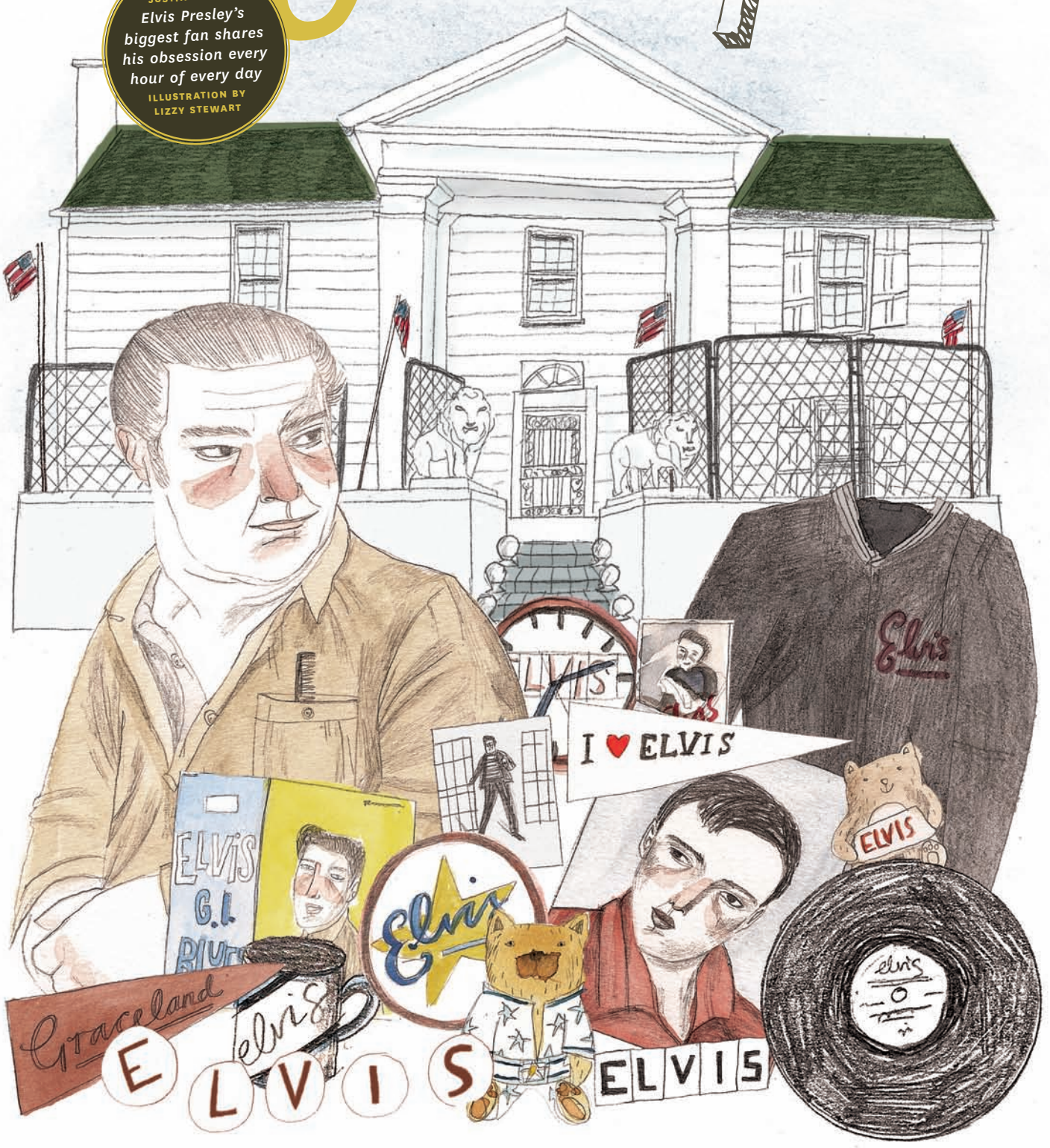


the king's keeper

BY JUSTIN JACOBS

Elvis Presley's biggest fan shares his obsession every hour of every day

ILLUSTRATION BY LIZZY STEWART



ALONE IN HIS HUGE, ANTEBELLUM HOUSE BUILT IN 1853 IN HOLLY SPRINGS, MISS., PAUL MACLEOD IS LIVING HIS VISION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM. HE'S A 67-YEAR-OLD FORMER ASSEMBLY-LINE WORKER, AND IT SHOWS—HIS FACE SLUMPS LIKE A WET TOWEL. HE SUBSISTS ON TWO CASES OF COCA-COLA A DAY. HIS WIFE, SERITA, LEFT HIM YEARS AGO, AND HE HASN'T SEEN HER SINCE. HIS SON, TOO, LEFT LONG AGO. BUT MACLEOD DOESN'T MIND LIVING ALONE: HE'S GOT ELVIS PRESLEY.

For 20 years, MacLeod has operated his own live-in Elvis museum called Graceland Too. Every corner, wall and inch of ceiling in his two-story mansion is covered with Elvis memorabilia, from The King's high school report card (he failed music) to plush tigers (in honor of Elvis' martial-arts name) and thousands of posters, clippings and photographs. MacLeod keeps Graceland Too open 24 hours a day, every day of the year. If he's slipped into a light sleep at 4 a.m., knock loud enough and he'll give you a tour. Only five bucks.

Graceland Too isn't really about Elvis Presley. It's about creating another world, one in which Paul MacLeod is king, slap-happy and in love with his favorite rock star, blissfully unaware of the faster, meaner, grimier world beyond his property. "I'm prepared to die right now if I could bring that guy back," he tells me with a voice that sounds like he's gargling maple syrup. While outsiders—368,000 people since 1990, by his count—stop by and see him as an oddity, an old man gone batty, MacLeod says he's "doin' just what makes me happy."

An hour south of Memphis and an hour north of Elvis' birthplace in Tupelo, Holly Springs is an archetypal Deep South small town. Businesses close early; people walk home.

Dominey Long is 21, all Southern-blonde beauty and reserve, and she works at Marshall County Music, her father's guitar shop on the town's central square. She's visited Graceland Too—everyone in Holly Springs has at least once—but she doesn't plan to go back.

"The only way you can really describe what's inside there is to go. It is..." She pauses, searching for the proper word, and elongates every syllable: "In-ter-est-ing."

The people of Holly Springs generally fall into three camps in their views of MacLeod. Some see him as a freak. "People egg his house," Long says. "They go by and knock and they just run away. People torment him because he's... different." An even smaller group see MacLeod as an endearing eccentric, his love and dedication an inspiration. The overwhelming majority, though, doesn't see him at all. He's the Elvis guy who doesn't leave his house, attracts drunken college kids from Ole Miss, keeps a cache of guns lying around and blares "Hound Dog" at 3 a.m. Simple as that. "I don't know if proud is the right word," Long says. "People are just used to it."

Elvis obsession is now older than Elvis ever was. *Forbes* has named Presley the fourth-most profitable deceased celebrity, his estate annually netting $55 million. Elvis Presley Enterprises has sanctioned more than 350 fan clubs worldwide. At the time of Elvis' death in 1977, there were fewer than 75 professional impersonators; today the number exceeds 35,000. In 2005, a British parking attendant was prosecuted for stealing upwards of $980,000 to spend on Elvis records and memorabilia. The anecdotes are endless. Elvis' popularity "can't be explained by great voice, good looks, charismatic personality," says Graceland-endorsed Elvis expert Stephen Christopher. "When you have the entire globe in your hand, there's more to it than that." Fanatics range from record collectors to, as Christopher says, "10-year-old kids in England who know who the key grip on every Elvis movie was." And then there's Paul MacLeod.

"I'M PREPARED TO DIE RIGHT NOW IF I COULD BRING THAT GUY BACK," HE TELLS ME WITH A VOICE THAT SOUNDS LIKE HE'S GARGLING MAPLE SYRUP.

Graceland Too is guarded by two giant plaster lions that rest atop a five-foot cinder-block wall surrounding the house. With the chain-link fence on top of the wall, the property resembles a fortress. MacLeod's driveway is sealed from the street by barbed wire, and just inside is a security booth staffed by a mannequin wearing a police jacket.

The lock on the front door is a knotted leather belt. When I knock on the thick glass, nothing happens. After eight minutes, I hear some shuffling inside. MacLeod opens up. He's wearing a camouflage jacket with a comb in the front pocket. His slicked-back, once-thick black hair now looks like wax. When he speaks, his words slip and trip out of his mouth, his dentures rarely keeping pace with his gums. He doesn't have an email address and doesn't give out his car-phone number, so Suzann Williams, assistant director of the Holly Springs Tourism and Recreation Bureau, passes along any messages. MacLeod was expecting me.

A sign pronounces Paul MacLeod "the Universe's, Galaxy's, Planet's, World's Ultimate #1 Fan." Graceland Too's front parlor room houses many of his 35,000 Elvis recordings, hundreds hung up on the wall and ceiling. It seems like an understatement.

"YOU COME HERE AND HE TELLS YOU THINGS ARE WORTH $10,000 AND YOU SEE THE $1.50 PRICE TAG. BUT YOU DON'T CARE. YOU WANT TO ACCEPT WHAT PAUL SAYS BECAUSE PAUL'S REALITY IS BETTER THAN OUR REALITY"

MacLeod points to a photograph. "There's a picture of Elvis in Tupelo with a little hat on. His own family looks at that picture, looks at it real good, and they don't even know it's my son they're lookin' at! That's right, my son was born Elvis Aaron Presley MacLeod. He's a dead ringer for Elvis."

I ask when the Presleys looked at the photograph, and where his son is now, but it seems the Graceland Too tour train stops for no one.

"You ever heard of Stevie Wonder, the blind singer? I got so much gold and platinum around here shinin', turns out I could make Stevie Wonder see again," he says, pointing to a sparkling gold lamé suit, a replica of a classic Elvis get-up.

Locked in a cabinet in the next room are just a few bottles from MacLeod's "250 million dollars in cash worth of Elvis Presley wine." Later, a bag of ashes, "the first flowers placed on Elvis Presley's grave." But mostly, these aren't Elvis artifacts. They're Paul MacLeod artifacts. One wall shelves hundreds of newspapers, the "400 papers worldwide that've put me on the cover," he tells me. Another wall is covered with videotapes. MacLeod modestly estimates that he's "been on every television program in the world. And I own the rights to all of 'em." The back storage room is lined with Polaroids of thousands of Graceland Too visitors, with photos of "46,000 new members that I still gotta hang up" resting in boxes.

Three big-screen TVs sit facing MacLeod's bed on the first floor, the only place to sit in the entire house. All three are set on different channels, to capture even the briefest mention of Elvis.

"If some bastard yells Elvis' name, any second, it's recording. I'm lucky if I sleep around here for five or 10 minutes. Last year I didn't sleep for three straight days and nights," he says. MacLeod hands me a three-ring binder, opens it and points to a typed passage: "1:05 a.m., August 6, 1992, NBC, Arsenio Hall mentions Elvis in his monologue."

"Up to the second," he snaps.

MacLeod's favorite stories are of the woman who "dropped dead in front of my face" at his first Elvis concert in 1954, thereby launching his obsession. There are stories of girls who come by "rippin' their panties off 24 hours a day," of how his only son (who declined to comment) looks and sounds just like Elvis and of how, when MacLeod's wife confronted him about his Elvis obsession, he "handed her a million dollars in cash and told her ass bye" because "[Elvis] just makes me happier than she did." MacLeod proudly shows off pictures of his sisters, who "are dead ringers for Jayne Mansfield, Brigitte Bardot, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell and Priscilla Presley."

"We all paint a canvas of who we think people are," says Sue Watson, a staff writer at Holly Springs' *South Reporter*, who's met MacLeod but doesn't claim to know him. "But in that painting, in that brush there's also part of who we are. We want to find an island where we can stand on a real clean spot and be the observer and look over into any country, any land, any individual, any psyche. But we're all standing on the same ground."

Around 2:30 a.m., 19-year-old Steven Cook and some friends from Memphis step down off the porch of Graceland Too. Cook's visited MacLeod more than three times, making him a card-carrying lifetime member.

"You come here and he tells you things are worth $10,000 and you see the $1.50 price tag. But you don't care. You want to accept what Paul says because Paul's reality is better than our reality," Cook says. "At Disney World, you might think 'Bullshit, we're not actually in a cave.' But here? 'Paul, you're completely correct.'"

To many visitors, Paul MacLeod is as much a roadside attraction as, say, the World's Largest Buffalo in Jamestown, North Dakota: a strange, briefly entertaining diversion. Maybe the joke is on them. Behind the barbed wire and the belted-shut door, Paul MacLeod lives out his fantasy. Spreading the good word of The King is urgent business, and he's the royal messenger. *Fin*

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SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

A musical breakthrough years in the making

BY STEVE LABATE

SHARON JONES & THE DAP-KINGS

I Learned the Hard Way

DAPTONE

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Talk about a late bloomer. Sharon Jones was brimming with promise as a kid in church choirs in the 1960s, as she bounced back and forth between her birth city of Augusta, Ga. and her mother in Brooklyn. She also had a foot firmly planted in the world of secular music, spending countless hours imitating the songs and dances of fellow Augusta native James Brown. As a teen in 1970s New York, Jones flirted with fame, making many uncredited appearances as a backup singer on gospel, soul, blues and disco recordings. But when the neon-flash '80s hit, her style was suddenly considered outdated. To support herself, she worked as a prison guard at Rikers Island (which surely came in handy later while shaking down sketchy promoters who dared hold out on her at the end of the night).

In the late '90s, then-fortysomething Jones made another go at a music career, releasing her first solo work, a series of 45-rpm vinyl singles for the retro-minded Desco label. But it wasn't until 2002 that she dropped her first solo LP, *Dap-Dippin'*, or until 2007 that she released her first standard-worthy song, "100 Days, 100 Nights"; now, at age 53, she has released her first truly great album, *I Learned the Hard Way*.

I've often heard the argument made—especially by wizened rock critics and music-industry vets—that all the young 'uns mesmerized by Jones and the Dap-Kings have been duped into believing that what would've been a dime-a-dozen soul revue back in the day is in the league of the all-time greats, thanks to the near-complete absence of authentic soul music in our digital age. I can see the merits of this idea: Jones' first three records were solid, chronicling a measured shift from aggressive '70s funk to melodic '60s soul—but while the musicianship was strong, Jones' vocals incinerating and bandleader Bosco Mann's throwback production impressively authentic, the songs were mostly nondescript. They lacked hooks and choruses strong enough to put the leading lady into the company of the legends she and the Dap-Kings imitated.

With *Hard Way*, though, this is no longer the case. The album's majestic Philly-soul/Thom-Bell-indebted opener "The Game Gets Old" plays like a reality-check epilogue to The Delfonics' 1970 I'm-really-leaving-you breakup anthem "Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)." It's an instant classic, and Jones' finest moment yet—an unusually successful attempt at capturing the perennially bruised heart of a struggling single. "So many times I've played the game of love but it always ends in vain," Jones belts with the aching sincerity of someone who's had her heart broken time and time again. "I'm back in the ring with my boxing gloves so I'm gonna feel some pain." When it seems she's about to break down, the shuffling hi-hat and funky guitar riffs spur her on; she draws strength from the swelling strings, and clings to the tiniest glimmer of hope as it chimes elusively off the bells.

From there, *I Learned the Hard Way* doesn't let up. There are half a dozen potential soul standards—"The Game Gets Old," the title track, "Better Things to Do," "Money," "Window Shopping," "Mama Don't Like My Man"—and not a single weak link connecting them. The songs are both timeless and timely, as Jones tackles the recession ("Banks foldin', President scratchin' his head / ... Got to pay my bills, got to pay my rent / I'm hungry and tired but my money's all spent"), domestic abuse ("Came home drunk in the middle of the night / Screaming and swingin' with all of your might / But a child couldn't put up a fight") and independence ("I got better things to do than remember you"). Musically, it's her most all-encompassing record, a synthesis of all the regional soul styles of the '60 and '70s: the sweltering rawness of Muscle Shoals, the canyon-deep grooves and melodic horn stacking of Memphis, the gorgeous slow-cooked string arrangements and high drama of Philadelphia, the irresistibly confectioned shoop-ee-doop backup vocals and candy-hook pop sensibilities of Chicago and Detroit. This time around, Jones and the Dap-Kings convincingly channel their many musical ancestors—Tina Turner, Otis Redding, Al Green, Isaac Hayes, The Staple Singers, Charles Wright, James Brown, The Temptations, The Delfonics, Marvin Gaye—like no one has in decades.

Part of what makes this funky coup possible is the period-specific recording approach of producer/engineer Mann (aka Daptone Records co-founder Gabriel Roth), who has become a master of facilitating the suspension of disbelief necessary for listeners to embrace this antiquated sound. Mann recorded *I Learned the Hard Way* straight to a vintage Ampex eight-track, and the band almost exclusively uses instruments and gear made during the era they're trying to emulate. This is the truly groundbreaking aspect of their music—their commitment to recreating a classic genre.

Jones and the Dap-Kings make the kind of music that moves them, and their feverish passion is contagious. I caught one of their performances at Atlanta rock club The Earl a few years ago, and it was one of the wildest, sweatiest dance parties I've experienced. Everyone was packed in, grooving hard as they could in what little space they could find, grinning and letting loose. The Dap-Kings unleashed confetti explosions of funk and soul and Jones prowled the stage, ranting and raving like a possessed preacher. But instead of hell-fire and brimstone, she was calling down pure, unfettered joy and throwing it into the crowd like bolts of lighting—ready to burn everyone's souls clean down to ash, so they could start anew. And now, with *Hard Way*, she's got more songs to match that level of performance.

This is Jones and the Dap-Kings' moment. The waters of the mainstream have already been tested with the backing band's 2006 Amy Winehouse collaboration, and considering the tangible creative strides they've made with Jones on this new album, together they seem poised to finally burst through the dam that's kept them secret from the masses these last eight years.

8.6

↪ STEVE LABATE IS A *PASTE* SENIOR CONTRIBUTING WRITER. BACKSTAGE AT BONNAROO A FEW YEARS AGO, SHARON JONES TRIED (IN VAIN) TO TEACH HIM HOW TO CAMEL WALK.

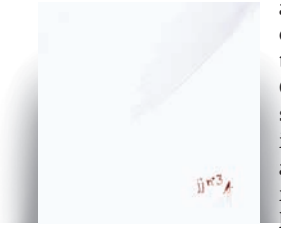
Photo by Steven Dewall

MISTY MYSTERY

Swedish duo loses itself in the ether

BY MICHAELANGELO MATOS

jj *jj nº 3*
SECRETLY CANADIAN
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW



Jj evokes a world where pop music's ultimate pursuit is immaculate fluff, and that's not an insult. Between its burbling timbres and breathy vocals, its feathery production and demure touches, the duo's first album—confusingly titled *jj nº 2* ("nº 1" was a single)—seemed to be set on a warm beach inhabited by day dreamers fanasizing about flitting around foreign continents (the bouncy single "From Africa to Málaga") over lambent, near-Hawaiian guitars and Peter Gabriel-ish production. It featured an interpolation of Lil Wayne's "Lollipop" that was every bit as buttery and sugar-powdered as the original songs that hinted at bandmates Elin Katlander and Joakim Benon's affinitity for early Everything But the Girl. Katlander sounded caring, empathetic and somewhat mystical, but a little blank. Of course, Swedes aren't the most forthcoming of people (I'm from Minnesota, which counts as research). Hell, no one even knew who these two people were until the beginning of this year; for a while, it was rumored that jj was the anonymous side project of some folks from The Tough Alliance, whose label Sincerely Yours released the duo's record.

jj nº 3 arrives to eager expectations that seem a little misplaced. For one thing, it's hard to imagine Katlander and Benon lunging for the brass ring. For another, this album sounds like a retreat, not an advance; it's more tentative than *jj nº 2*, and however appropriate that might seem given jj's generally wispy air, it's not an encouraging development. Like the last one, this album—which is 27 minutes long, shorter than a lot of purported EPs these days—doesn't really rev up until the fluttery disco of "Into the Light," which is still pretty slow-mo. (It's also followed by a track called "Light," which is too damn literal to be clever.)

The songs on *jj nº 2*, for all their aural padding, had defined edges; they were shapely, from the strings on "Things Will Never Be the Same Again" to Katlander's surprisingly tough vocals on the acoustic "Are You Still in Vallda?" *jj nº 3* doesn't feel that way. Here, "Light"—driven by tranquil acoustic guitars, a smidgen of whistling and a dusting of electronics—is lovely during the instrumental section, but ultimately floats away without leaving much impression.

> The songs on *jj nº 2*, for all their aural padding, had defined edges. *jj nº 3* doesn't feel that way.

Emotionally, the album is as melancholy as the music makes it sound. "And Now" goes, in part, "Take it for what it's worth / Those days we walked the earth / Remember how much it hurts / Just a tiny taste / Oh, let us go to waste." Even the forthright words of "Voi Parlate, Io Gioco" ("I don't know about you / But I need something new / I don't care what the people say / I 'm gonna get it anyway") sound somewhat inert when Katlander coos them so affectlessly; the song's mild breakbeat doesn't amp it up any, either. "Golden Virginia," with its ghostly background vocals and soft-focus bass-drum beat (not to mention the wooden flute solo), skirts Enya a little too closely for comfort.

"Voi Parlate" features, in the midst of what sounds like a xylophone solo, the heavily reverberant sound of Joakim Benon's finger sliding down a guitar string as it changes chords. It's one of those moments of sonic luxury that has drawn people to jj's music; as with much headphones music, touches like that are part of the appeal. But it's hard not to wonder if those touches aren't superseding the basic sonic framework here. There's plenty of pleasant stuff to sink one's ears into on *jj nº 3*. There's just not enough underneath it.

6.3

Photo of jj by Malin Bernalt

DR. DOG

Shame, Shame

ANTI-

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Feelin' good

Considering how friendly Dr. Dog's music is, it's hard to believe the band has proved so divisive. Hating on the Philadelphia quintet is like beating up the neighborhood kids who spend all summer riding bikes and building forts—you may feel older and wiser, but who's having a better time than them? The band's sun-drenched, feel-good vibe belies songs as full of personal conviction as those of any acoustic-strumming bleeding heart. If anything, Dr. Dog's edge is that they don't have one—this is unabashed, love-each-other pop from a band that once named an album *We All Belong* and filled it with music proving just that.

Shame, Shame is the band's sixth LP and its first release on independent mainstay Anti- after leaving boutique label Park the Van, but there's no sign here of bigger and better production. Compared to 2008's glossy jewel *Fate*, this album actually seems like a step away from the band's usual sheen and accessibility. These 11 tunes stretch out over 40 minutes like a yawn after a good nap, and they're nearly as refreshing. Bassist Toby Leaman's gruff, bluesy howl and guitarist Scott McMicken's high, wide-eyed tenor have long split the band's songs like fraternal twins—easy to distinguish, but distinctly of the same stock. On *Shame, Shame*, McMicken's songs really shine, his McCartney-ish melodies overshadowing Leaman's moodier offerings. The album's best track, "Where'd All the Time Go?" finds McMicken cooing about a girl who "gets dressed up like a pillow, so she's always in bed" to a mellotron undulating like high tide, a wave of backing harmony and a set of quick guitar licks, all playing like a *Pet Sounds* B-side. And there ain't no shame in that. **JUSTIN JACOBS** **8.2**

FREE ENERGY

Stuck on Nothing

ASTRALWERKS

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW (DIGITAL), MAY 4 (PHYSICAL)

Forgettable summer fun

Free Energy's debut LP boasts all the youthful zeal of the first day of summer break: kids tumbling down the front steps of school, making a beeline for swim trunks, trampolines and sunburns while flinging homework papers high into the air. *Stuck on Nothing*'s gargantuan hooks and snappy "nah-nah-nah-nah's" guarantee the album's place in convertible stereos and poolside boom-boxes well into August. The band's sheer tenacity gives the tracks a dizzying exuberance, but they don't quite have the chops to deliver their generation's "Summer in the City"; tracks like "Dream City" and "Bang Pop" are delightful, but as disposable as cheap plastic sunglasses. Like a scoop of orange sherbet dropped on a searing sidewalk, the album's energy and novelty will melt long before the tan-lines and mosquito bites fade away. **GRAY CHAPMAN** **7.0**

DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS

The Big To-Do

ATO

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Blue-collar bards tell an epic tale

The last hot-barbecue platter from these Athens, Ga.-based workaholics, 2008's *Brighter Than Creation's Dark*, was a characteristically stomping monster, 19 tracks of roaring awesomeness that felt like a pretty deliberate screw-off to supporters of the Judiciously Edited Album. This quick-to-arrive follow-up whittles things down to more manageable levels, but still swings big. Once again, the Truckers conjure up satisfying and cinematic songs with the greatest of ease, from a reservoir-town murder ("Drag The Lake Charlie") to thoughtful strippers ("Birthday Boy") and self-approved self-destruction ("The Fourth Night of My Drinking"). The images are less specific to the swamps of Dixie than to a generally ragged, discouraged America. The big change this time is the band's sound, which is splashier, messier and decorated with organ work by new full-timer Jay Gonzalez, brought on after the band's tour with Booker T. Jones last year. This dive-diner opera may be smaller, but it's still huge. **JEFF VRABEL** **7.8**

Photo of Dr. Dog by Jason Nocito

LAURA MARLING

I Speak Because I Can

ASTRALWERKS

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Twenty is the new 347

Laura Marling had just turned 18 when she released her 2008 debut, *Alas, I Cannot Swim*, but it seemed like she'd already lived four or five lifetimes. By then, she had somehow digested the entire canon of British folk music along with her guitar lessons, in the process becoming world-weary enough to write lines like "The gods that he believes never fail to disappoint me" and "Don't cry child, you've got so much more to live for / Don't cry child, you've got something I would die for." And in between touring the globe and being touted as the young queen of a new-folk revival (and shattering the heart of her then-boyfriend/producer, Noah and the Whale's Charlie Fink, indirectly giving us one of 2009's best symphonic breakup albums, *First Days of Spring*), she found it in herself to make yet another gorgeous, melancholy, old-souled record.

Despite its uncanny emotional weight, *Alas* has its moments of glittering girlishness and sounds at times like it was recorded in an upstairs bedroom at her parents' house. *I Speak Because I Can* trades in references to broken dolls for tales of real live babies found in the forest and the yearning for a "Tap at my Window," for the love of a "Rambling Man." Fellow new-folk vanguards Mumford & Sons (who released their own excellent album earlier this year) reprise their occasional role as Marling's backup band, providing urgent, dirty-fingernailed accompaniment—banjos, shuddering organ and occasional brotherly backing vocals—to her lovely, blustery voice and pace-setting guitar (strummed and finger-picked, both with increasing confidence). Marling avoids both precocity and self-seriousness, even when she sings, on the wrenching "Hope in the Air," "I forgave you your shortcomings and ignored your childish behavior / Laid a kiss on your head and before I left said, 'Stay away from fleeting failure.'" **8.9**

RACHAEL MADDUX

Photo by Max Knight

ROGUE WAVE

Permalight

BRUSHFIRE RECORDS

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW (6.5)

Going rogue, falling flat

In the three years since Rogue Wave's last album, frontman Zach Rogue has discovered the synthesizer. This isn't bad in theory, but in practice the newfound instrument does little to lift Rogue Wave to the next level. Tracks like the (unfortunately) club-influenced "Good Morning" would be satisfying without the ticking drum-machine and discotheque sampler. Which isn't to say the band can't write a punchy jam: "We Will Make a Song Destroy" pleases with dynamic guitar riffs and soaring harmonies. But the best tracks here are the unplugged, mid-tempo lullabies and straightforward (if unenterprising) stripped-down rock tunes—well-worn paths for Rogue Wave. "I'll Never Leave You," a simple acoustic promise of fidelity from father to son, works better than the group's contrived attempts to be dance-floor divas. Sometimes, it's best to stick with what you know. **6.5**

RACHEL BAILEY

NICK JAINA

A Bird in the Opera House

HUSH

RELEASE DATE:

AVAILABLE NOW

Starbucks-ready

There's something to be said for basic musical competency, and on his fifth solo LP, Nick Jaina proves he has it in spades. Problem is, competency is all that's going for this wispy, understated album's jumble of guitar ballads and orchestral-pop tunes. Jaina coos about love (jangle-fest "Sebastopol") and his obsessive need for female attention (the breezy and bluesy "Semoline") with practiced ease, right down to the clockwork swells of backing vocals and strings (for added emotional profundity!) on most of the tracks' third verse-choruses. And when he flirts with richer instrumentation on "Matrimonial Bed," layering ukulele, handdrums and beatboxing over martial snares, you might even tap a toe or two. But the majority of Jaina's evident talent is spun into middling, super-slick acoustic filler—perfect for coffeehouse background noise, and not much else. **MICHAEL SABA** **5.6**

SHELBY LYNNE

Tears, Lies & Alibis

EVERSO

RELEASE DATE:

AVAILABLE NOW

Only a little bit country

Despite her time-toughened twang and tunes about loneliness, betrayal and the road, Shelby Lynne is country only by association. A Nashville veteran who made five industry albums in the 90s, she hit it big only after leaving town and is now the proud owner of her own label, with many styles at her command: gritty southern soul, grittier folk and blues and—very unexpectedly—power-pop. "Rains Came," which opens her 11th album, *Tears, Lies & Alibis*, struts along like Cheap Trick gone acoustic, but sad-hearted laments like "Loser Dreamer" and "Home Sweet Home" prove her songwriting is as strong as her vocals. She even works her acting chops: On "Alibi," her spoken-word phrasing lends the song a pointed disdain, rendering her album persona a nearly unsympathetic character. Lynne has always been a commanding vocalist, and age has only sharpened her delivery and given her more to sing about. **STEPHEN M. DEUSNER** **7.9**

HEADPHONES MUSIC

All in the details

Michaelangelo Matos, in his review of *jj nº 3* (pg. 70), describes a moment (at 3:30 in "Voi Parlate, Io Gioco") in which Joakim Benon's finger can be heard sliding down a guitar string as it changes chords. The Swedish duo isn't the only group utilizing minute sonic imperfections on recent releases—subtle sound-bites like this one appear on albums throughout this issue's Reckoning. Here are a few moments to listen for. **RACHEL DOVEY**

Rogue Wave, *Permalight* (pg. 72) From 1:21 to 1:24 in "Stars and Stripes," a spine-tingling squeak sounds like skin sand-papering a resistant string.

Gary Lucas and Dean Bowman, *Chase the Devil* (pg. 87) At the end of "Nobody's House" (3:19), Bowman's voice breaks into a violent yodel and slides off into a roughly groomed series of sharps and flats.

Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars, *Rise & Shine* (pg. 79) The trombones in "Jah Mercy" (2:16 to 2:30) are so immediate, you can practically hear the players' spit resonating off the reeds.

Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings, *I Learned The Hard Way* (pg. 68) Listen for Jones' raucous laugh at 0:04 of "Better Things To Do."

Caribou, *Swim* (pg. 82) On "Bowls" (0:00 to 0:15) a Tibetan bowl vibrates and rings with an ear-splitting backbeat.

DOUBLE SHIFT

T Bone Burnett countries up an unlikely pair

BY STEVE DOLLAR

WILLIE NELSON 8.5

Country Music

ROUNDER

RELEASE DATE: AVAIABLE NOW

JAKOB DYLAN 7.2

Women and Country

COLUMBIA

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Among the many differences between Willie Nelson and Jakob Dylan, there's the matter of frequency: The silver-braided Nelson releases new records two or three times a year, like clockwork, while the younger Dylan has kept a more measured pace since his band The Wallflowers wilted from its late-'90s peak. Nonetheless, both performers tapped T Bone Burnett to be the sonic architect of their latest efforts, each album playing with its own idea of country music and showcasing two different sides of the Oscar-nominated producer.

Nelson's *Country Music* thumps to life with the unfussy airs of a pickin' parlor throwdown. This batch of vintage tunes—drawn from the American canon of country, blues and gospel as defined by seminal types like Ernest Tubb and Bob Wills—is delivered with his soulful, weathered authority. His trick is to seem nonchalant, but the sessions themselves were anything but offhand.

Nelson's tenure at the powerhouse Americana label Lost Highway yielded nearly 20 new albums, but none as distinguished as *Teatro*, his 1998 Island Records collaboration with ambient wizard Daniel Lanois. With *Country Music* signalling his arrival at a new label (Rounder) and a return to the studios of a city (Nashville) he'd once abandoned, Nelson decided to repeat a winning approach. Just like he did with Lanois, for *Country Music* he handed the keys to a studio whiz.

The songs and sidemen (Ronnie McCoury, Buddy Miller) were picked with an ear to Grand Ole Opry authenticity, akin to Burnett's work on the Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack. The natural, gloss-free sound clears the way for Willie's voice, as cozy as an old pair of slippers; the 77-year-old singer's persona is inseparable from any song he sings, even when he's never sung it before and even when it's cruise-ship reggae. Burnett simply picks a setting, introduces some variables—like the traditional "Satan Your Kingdom Must Come Down," previously covered by Uncle Tupelo and Medeski, Martin and Wood—and steps out of the way.

Women and Country, Jakob Dylan's second solo album, poses a different challenge. The singer-songwriter, now 40, long ago stepped out of his father's shadow (and outsold him by bucketloads) with The Wallflowers. But today's audiences are less enthralled by the mood-rock phenoms of the post-Nirvana goldrush. Dylan needed to recast himself and so he went back to Burnett, who brilliantly mapped an aural landscape far removed from the brooding, Tom Petty-inspired fare of The Wallflowers' breakthrough *Bringing Down the Horse* (which he also produced). Instead, *Women* evokes a mythical American South where an ambient drizzle of sounds—banjo, fiddle, pedal steel, the polyphony of New Orleans brass—sprinkled over lyrics about hard times.

Backed by the moonlighting harmonies of Neko Case and Kelly Hogan, Dylan sings soothingly about country roads and weathervanes, bloodhounds and blackbirds, floods and evictions. Maybe it's the presence of guitarist Marc Ribot, maybe it's the arrangements, or maybe it's Dylan's vocal register and choice of themes, but the vibe often recalls a more laid-back Tom Waits or Joe Henry. That's not bad company to keep, though Dylan's delivery lacks any edge or emotional undertow that make the lyrics speak more pointedly than Ribot's stinging guitar. No one would confuse this Jakob Dylan with the 26-year-old belting out "One Headlight"; *Women and Country* is a supremely professional, beautiful record that drifts easily into the background—it would make a great film score.

It's an interesting contradiction, the mega-producer polishing down these mega-musicians to give them that old-timey Americana sound.

That might sound like a back-handed compliment for Dylan, but it's not a knock on Burnett. After all, film scores have made him famous: Over the last decade, he's had phenomenal success orchestrating vibrant moments using traditional American music on the big screen, from *O Brother* to *Cold Mountain*, and most recently *Crazy Heart*. It's an interesting contradiction, the mega-producer polishing down these mega-musicians to give them that old-timey Americana sound. But that's what he does, and with both Nelson and Dylan's new albums he succeeds beautifully.

Photo by James Minchin

THE BIRD AND THE BEE

Interpreting the Masters Volume 1: A Tribute to Daryl Hall and John Oates

BLUE NOTE
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

And now, a note from John Oates

Anytime an artist covers a song by Daryl and myself, I am usually flattered and always curious. This is the first time that a band has dedicated an entire album to the music of Hall & Oates. In regard to their interpretation of our songs, what can I say? Inara George has a sensual, smooth delivery, and hearing these songs performed from a female point of view is both surprising and engaging. Greg Kurstin's production is very downtown noir; it's sonically coherent with a nod of respect to the retro, but more of a vision toward the future. This record is the aural VIP room where the musical genius of The Bird and the Bee hang out with the lounge lizards and create a cool new cocktail. Whatever they're mixing, I want some. **JOHN OATES**

Photo of John Oates courtesy of John Oates; photo of The Bird and the Bee by Brigitte Sire

BLACK PRAIRIE

Feast of the Hunters' Moon

SUGAR HILL
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 6

Instrumental quintet bridges continents

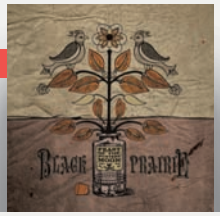
Combining the forces of Jenny Conlee, Chris Funk and Nate Query of The Decemberists with folk musicians Annalisa Tornfelt and Jon Neufeld, Portland's Black Prairie crafts an eclectic mix of traditional bluegrass and eastern European sounds. Though peppered with Tornfelt's wispy vocals, this debut album is primarily instrumental, shifting between twangy folk ("Atrocity at Celilo Falls"), fiddle-heavy bluegrass ("Back Alley," "Annie McGuire") and gypsy swoon, full of weeping strings and bouncy accordions ("A Prairie Musette," "Tango Oscuro"). The melodic ebb and flow through time and space is full of surprises—just when you've settled into the rootsy twang, the scene shifts and you're on a haunted street corner in the old country. **KRISTEN CALLIHAN** 7.8

GREG LASWELL

Take a Bow

VANGUARD
RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

Generic SoCal rock doesn't



Ask yourself a simple question: When you hear a stirring mid-tempo ballad on *Grey's Anatomy*, do you rush off to the iTunes Store? If the answer is yes, then Greg Laswell's *Take a Bow* is absolutely for you. The L.A. smoothie's fourth album so expertly splits time between intimate ballads, atmospheric soft rock and starchy hard rock that it feels focus-grouped. "My Fight (For You)" is a dimly smoldering piano ballad and "Lie to Me" wearily climbs tier upon tier of chiming guitars; meanwhile, the hard rock aspects are unconvincing—the crashing chorus of "Come Clean," for instance, feels stiff and forced. Laswell is an undemonstrative singer, his voice pleasant but tired and dry as the music around it. "I get a bit angry on a few tracks," Laswell blogged about this album, and it's true for some of the lyrics. If only more of that intensity had found its way into the music itself. **BRIAN HOWE** 4.5

FLYING LOTUS

Cosmogramma

WARP

RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

MC transcends jazz, hip-hop, space and time

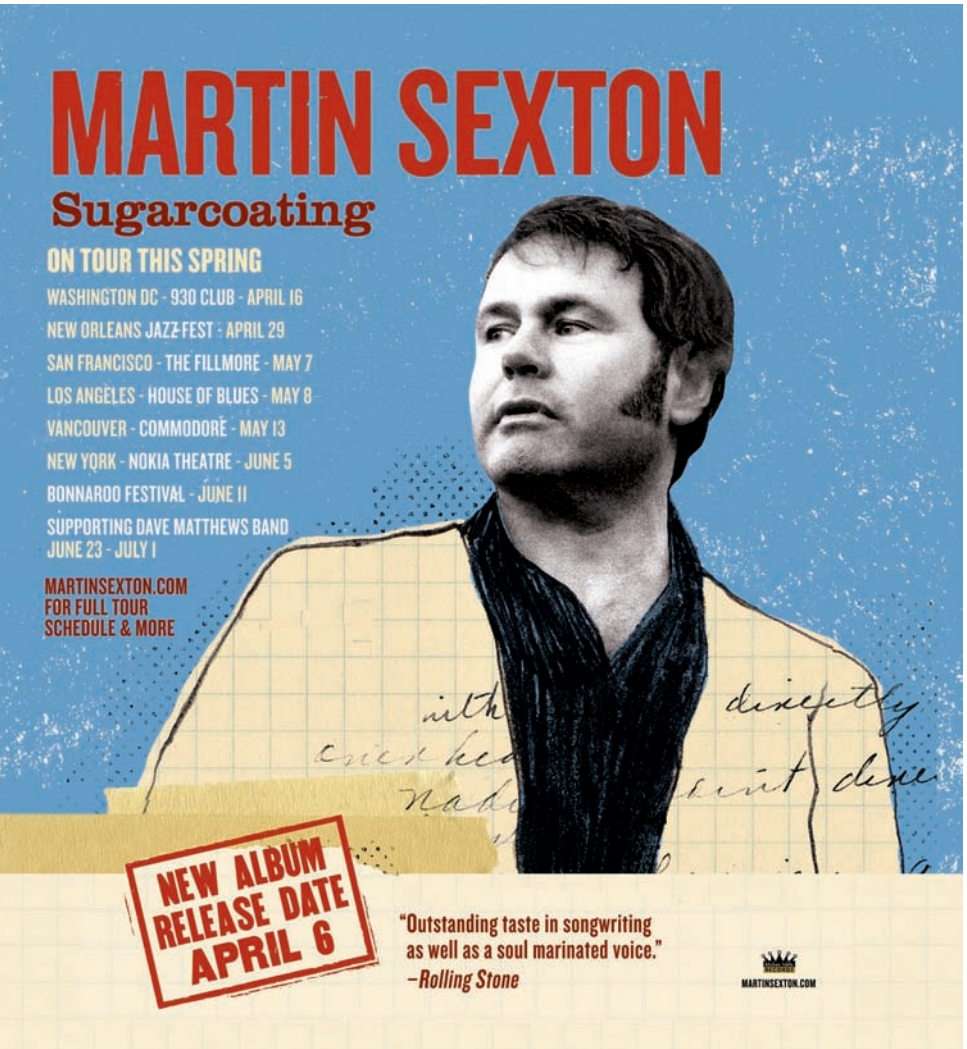
The second album from Los Angeles-based producer Flying Lotus (née Steven Ellison) is an engrossing exploration of sonic possibility. Featuring contributions from Thom Yorke, vocalist Laura Darlington, bass producer Thundercat and jazz instrumentalist Ravi Coltrane, it's a study in contrasts: provoking but reassuring, kinetic but focused, clean but clattering.

Ellison belongs to an international collective that stretches from the depths of L.A.—where he, Daedelus, Nosaj Thing and Gaslamp Killer, lit by the glow of their laptops, host a weekly club night known as Low End Theory—to the industrial heights of Glasgow, the territory of experimental production queen Mary Anne Hobbs. The magnetic live experience of Low End Theory is writ large on this album, which draws both from those complex layers of sound (so different from the measured hip-hop beats dominating the airwaves) and from Ellison's family history. His aunt, the late Alice Coltrane—that great jazz multi-instrumentalist and swamini of a California ashram—gave him the freewheeling vocabularies of both jazz and space-conscious East Indian spirituality, heirlooms on which *Cosmogramma* banks heavily.

Though it lacks a narrative frame, the album manages to remain stylistically and thematically cohesive. In the first 10 minutes, the beats build almost frantically, then relax into a dreamy spiral and spike again; Yorke and Darlington's vocals highlight Ellison's swirling sounds, giving them sonic edges. The Radiohead frontman's dreamy musings on "...And the World Laughs with You" aren't an intrusion, but they work better as gleams and fragments on "Do The Astral Plane," a track that begins with playful scatting and settles into a deep swinging groove, backed by impeccable percussion.

Flying Lotus has truly mastered the silicon machine: His byte-and-bass combo screams, buzzes and pounds through ever-shifting beats, which clink with mantra-like repetition until they suddenly give way to a universe of unforeseen noise. On *Cosmogramma*, this never-ending stream of aural textures sounds effortless, and the enthralling swirl of jazz, drum 'n' bass, dubstep and hip-hop beckons you toward the edge of something damn near cosmic. **KATELYN HACKETT** **8.9**

Photo by Timothy Saccenti


MARTIN SEXTON
Sugarcoating
ON TOUR THIS SPRING
WASHINGTON DC - 930 CLUB - APRIL 16
NEW ORLEANS JAZZ FEST - APRIL 29
SAN FRANCISCO - THE FILLMORE - MAY 7
LOS ANGELES - HOUSE OF BLUES - MAY 8
VANCOUVER - COMMODORE - MAY 13
NEW YORK - NOKIA THEATRE - JUNE 5
BONNAROO FESTIVAL - JUNE 11
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FOR FULL TOUR
SCHEDULE & MORE
NEW ALBUM
RELEASE DATE
APRIL 6
"Outstanding taste in songwriting
as well as a soul marinated voice."
–Rolling Stone
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KRIS KRISTOFFERSON

Please Don't Tell Me How The Story Ends: The Publishing Demos, 1968-72

LIGHT IN THE ATTIC

RELEASE DATE: MAY 11

Digging up the roots of an essential Music City songwriter

Over the last four decades, Kris Kristofferson has cut hit records and starred in too many movies to count, but the Nashville maverick should be remembered first and foremost as a songwriter. This appealing set of 16 previously unreleased demos ranges from his days of '60s obscurity to his early-'70s fame as one of the architects of the Outlaw movement, back when Janis Joplin's smash take on his "Me and Bobby McGee" helped to cover the rent. Along with Kristofferson's own hushed version of that song, highlights include the full-band recording "When I Loved Her," which could pass for polished Top 40 pop; the folky "Duvalier's Dream," featuring a voice that's sweeter than his usual growl; and the harrowing piano ballad "Epitaph (Black and Blue)." If the steady parade of soulful losers sometimes verges on predictability (and tunes like "The Lady's Not for Sale" do rely on cringe-worthy depictions of the opposite sex), just remember—these rough sketches weren't meant to be consumed en masse in the first place. **JON YOUNG** 8.1

SAM QUINN

The Fake That Sunk 1,000 Ships

RAMSEUR

RELEASE DATE: MAY 11

Twang and heart pangs

The last time we heard from Sam Quinn, he was singing his sad, weary soul out alongside his Everybodyfields' partner Jill Andrews. On his solo debut, the big-bearded strummer mostly sticks to what he knows: lonesome Americana tunes that pair well with a glass of scotch and a creaky porch swing, lovelorn and moaning with pedal steel, piano parlor accompaniment and warbling vocals. The album errs on the side of monotonous, which is too bad, because Quinn shines when he boots the boy-and-his-guitar act and joins his backing band, The Japan Ten, for raw vocal harmonies, as on "Late The Other Night" and "Help Me." Beautiful, aching moments abound on this album, especially on opener "Hello," but the downtrodden tempos and Quinn's dedication to sad song conventions end up weighing the album down. **LIZ STINSON** 6.2

KATE NASH

My Best Friend is You

FICTION/GEFFEN

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Schoolgirl-rock pops like Bubble Yum

Kate Nash's latest is bratty Brit-pop with a heavy accent and, at times, equally heavy subject matter. 2007's *Made of Bricks* saw her puckering: "You said I must eat so many lemons 'cause I am so bitter / I said I'd rather be with your friends, mate, 'cause they are much fitter." *My Best Friend is You* is peppered with pettiness, too, but it's a little more grown-up—and way more amped-up. In the spoken-word rant that opens "Mansion Song," Nash trades boys for politics, touting her disgust with the sex-for-work ethic like a freshman English major: "I can get fucked like the best of men / Like the best of men, like the worst of pain inflicted on a another young girl again." The music is quicker and dirtier here too—lots of electric-sampling, off-tempo ska-beats and screams sprinkled amidst the clean guitar, marching drums and piano. It's catchy without being annoying, and even the more dour songs put a little jump-rope swagger in your step; there's never been a more upbeat declaration of "later on I'll cry my stupid eyes out." Nash's biggest strength is simple: She forces herself into your head and you're more than willing to make room for her. **JENNA WOGINRICH** 7.6

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THE APPLES IN STEREO

Travellers in Space and Time

YEP ROC/SIMIAN/ELEPHANT 6
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Sextet blasts off but remains in orbit

Those who've come to love The Apples in Stereo for the band's colorful, high-energy tunes won't be disappointed by its seventh studio album. *Travellers in Space and Time* leans heavily on futuristic kitsch, sporting campy touches like robotic pulses, vocoder sound-scrambling and intermittent directions from a *Charlie's Angels*-esque commander. "Whether you are lying down or seated in a chair, adjust yourself to your most comfortable position," the British-accented man intones. The songs don't exactly span the musical solar system, maintaining the same general tempo and flow throughout the fifty-minute ride, but despite its rather static, predictable quality, *Travellers* manages to take listeners on a journey out of this world, but just barely. **ANNA SWINDLE** 6.9

NNEKA

Concrete Jungle

DECON
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Pride, but no prejudice

This 28-year-old's U.S. debut could hardly be more appropriately titled. *Concrete Jungle* captures Nneka's steely resolve and desire to flourish in an unforgiving world. The album is both affirmative and entertaining, addressing themes of political upheaval, reconciliation and the ignorance that so often comes with privilege. Her velvety voice is backed by smooth horns and fierce drum beats; "Mind vs. Heart," a plea for self-awareness and compassion ("What is the mind without the heart? / What am I without my shadow?"), stands in stark contrast to the exuberant "From Africa 2 U," which builds its chorus on staccato repetitions of "Af-ri-ca! Af-ri-ca!" The other 10 songs fall somewhere between these extremes, artfully melding the richness of Nneka's voice with lush musical soundscapes and hard-hitting lyrics. **ANI VRABEL** 5.6

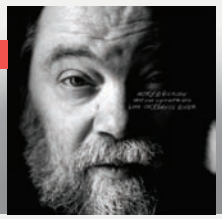
JOHN HIATT

The Open Road

NEW WEST RECORDS
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

A worn-out road

On first listen, John Hiatt's 19th studio album sounds like the rallying cry of an American absconder, all fugitive lead-footing and Mardi Gras beads hanging from rearview mirrors. But in the end, the characters of the Indianapolis-born songwriter's country-blues ballads are happiest when they have someone to settle down with, even if they have a hard time staying put. "I got down on my knees last night and I thanked someone / for the chance for two people to try and live together and not roam," Hiatt sings just before his woman leaves him in "Wonder Of Love." Hiatt puts these thoughts to paper in his signature cerebral style, but it isn't enough to make these played-out themes feel fresh. It's been half a century since Kerouac's trendsetting tale, and the open road—with its glamours and temptations—has been traveled too many times to hold much allure, at least with Hiatt at the wheel. **RACHEL BAILEY** 5.7



ROKY ERICKSON WITH OKKERVIL RIVER

True Love Cast Out All Evil

ANTI-
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

Pleading sanity

Roky Erickson, the famously broken Austin, Texas pysch-rock pioneer, has occasionally sent back transmissions from the strange lands to which he wandered after much electric Kool-Aid and forced electroshock. His last semi-lucid album, 1995's *All That May Do My Rhyme*, found him spirited but toned down. Now, the man who cried alien completes his re-entry to earth. For *True Love Cast Out All Evil*, Erickson drafted fellow Austinites Okkervil River to help recreate a dozen songs he wrote during and after his stint in a Texas psychiatric hospital. The group—with frontman Will Sheff as producer—defers to the chief, allowing Erickson's gruff voice to reign over woozy background vocals ("John Lawman"), punchy brass sections ("Think of as One") and Ebow lullabies ("Birds'd Crash"). Bookends "Devotional Number One" and "God Is Everywhere" flow like hymns from solitary, ripped and remixed from time-warped tapes. Gone are references to the otherworldly abductors that haunted Erickson's work in the '70s and '80s; the only body-snatcher in *True Love* is the paternalistic court system that once upon a daymare locked him up in his own head. But Erickson, whose improbable boomerang to well-being has been documented nearly to death, no longer sounds fazed. **CAMERON BIRD** 7.6

SIERRA LEONE'S REFUGEE ALL STARS

Rise & Shine

CUMBANCHA
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

Transcending tragedy with reggae backbeats

The members of Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars lost family, friends and limbs to the civil war that consumed their home country in the 1990s. Through protest songs teeming with bright Afropop melodies, the troupe escaped from West African warfare to recording studios and concert stages worldwide, their 2006 debut *Living Like a Refugee* symbolizing musical and spiritual resilience. Follow-up *Rise & Shine* is a tribute to roots reggae on which the ensemble dabbles in electric backbeats and bombastic horns, swapping earlier references to their homeland—family, food, even soap—for reggae's ubiquitous praises to Jah. The All Stars have distanced themselves from the strife that first brought them together, but thanks to their tireless optimism, socio-political awareness ("disarmament is a modern revolution," proclaims "Global Threat") and the rumbling jam session "Tamagbondorsu (The Rich Mock The Poor)," they still have something to teach the world. **CHRISTINA LEE** 8.1

SUGAR HILL
VANGUARD

MERLE HAGGARD I Am What I Am **4.20** **GREG LASWELL** Take a Bow **5.4** **THE LIVING SISTERS** Love to Live **3.30** **BLACK PRAIRIE** Feast of the Hunters' Moon **4.6** **THE WATSON TWINS** Talking to You, Talking to Me **OUT NOW** **DAPHNE WILLIS** What To Say **OUT NOW**

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GREAT DEPRESSION

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BY JASON KILLINGSWORTH

THE NATIONAL

High Violet

4AD

RELEASE DATE: MAY 11

If MGMT colors its musical canvas with fluorescent candy-scented magic markers, and Coldplay favors the niceness of pastel watercolors, The National's output resembles a painstaking charcoal sketch with dramatic interplay between light and shadow. The five-piece's cerebral rock 'n' roll makes no apologies for its bleak emotional tenor, and I still can't listen to their 2007 masterpiece *Boxer* without imagining myself slouching down the midwinter streets of Manhattan alone at 3 a.m., watching my icy breath spill into the dark like cigarette smoke. That record unfolds in a series of dramatic vignettes, populated by a cast of narrators so crippled with paranoia and insecurity they make Holden Caulfield seem positively buoyant.

The band's new album, *High Violet*—which took roughly a year of intense recording at both their newly built studio space and producer Peter Katis' Tarquin Studios in Bridgeport, Conn.—revels in the same dark hues. Late last year, frontman Matt Berninger confided to music blog Stereogum, "We started out trying to make a fun pop record. I had the word 'HAPPINESS' taped to my wall. We veered off that course immediately."

Boxer's opener, "Fake Empire," set the tone for that album with gently syncopated piano chords that reinforced the song's theme of blocking out the ugliness of the world by distracting oneself with

cheery fantasies of bluebirds and diamond slippers. *High Violet* echoes that approach as opening track "Terrible Love" announces itself with a muddy guitar churn, later boasting a gorgeous series of background choral "oohs." But as the song progresses, all signifiers of beauty are paved over with menacing guitar fuzz and clattering percussion. It's a grim, ramshackle, singularly uninviting welcome. And the tune's sharpened incisors leave a mark as Matt Berninger sings about insomnia: "Without a little help, it takes a while to settle down." It's easy to imagine this swirl of discordant noise representing the narrator's psychological unrest—the opposite of the "rosy-minded fuzz" mentioned in *Boxer* single "Apartment Story."

Still, the album opens sluggishly, especially coupled with second track "Sorrow." When a band's music relies this heavily on nuance, the line separating hum-along from just ho-hum narrows considerably, and it's a credit to The National's creative instincts that they've stayed mostly on the winning side of that dichotomy. *High Violet* is front-loaded with its two most unremarkable tracks, but despite those early missteps, it maintains that balance between light and dark shades, the balance that has defined and sustained the band's work all along. The album eventually hits its stride with "Anyone's Ghost," a fun, lightly bouncing riff that features Bryan Devendorf's most infectious drumming to date. Played live, it won't get the crowd dancing, but it's guaranteed to get every head in the place nodding.

Just as it's hard to imagine Leonard Cohen rattling off a sticky pop ditty, Berninger possesses a set of a pipes divinely crafted to luxuriate in sad-bastard music. Another gift sets him apart from rock's legions of mopey minstrels: a pitch-black sense of humor so finely tuned that even the most sullen-sounding lyrics can't mask the rich vein of sardonic bemusement coursing just beneath the surface. Amid the insistent see-sawing groove of "Lemonworld," Berninger sings "I gave my heart to the Army, the only sentimental thing I could think of / Cousins and cousins somewhere overseas, but it'll take a better war to kill a college man like me." Later, in "Conversation 16," the narrator airs a laundry list of personal misgivings that range from mundane ("Try to hold it together till our friends are gone / ... Do not want to disappoint anyone") to flat-out bizarre ("I was afraid I'd eat your brains, 'cause I'm evil.")

> The band's impeccably nuanced song-arranging instincts are one of their most remarkable gifts, and *High Violet* certainly bolsters this reputation.

Other highlights include recent live favorite "Bloodbuzz Ohio," which showcases one of Berninger's signature vocal tricks—he compensates for his lack of melodic range by varying his delivery, clinging to each word a second longer than you expect before delivering the next.

Though *High Violet* lacks the front-to-back consistency that made *Boxer* such an unmitigated revelation, the new album's peaks absolutely rival *Boxer*'s best tracks. The National's unique brand of torture-chamber pop and fascination with 21st-century paranoia and psychological unrest provide an evocative thematic template; it's not a blueprint for mainstream crossover success, but *High Violet* has the potential to elevate the band's profile. If the characters Berninger creates suffer from year-round seasonal affective disorder, it'll be interesting to see if the spotlight snaps them out of it.

8.1

➥ JASON KILLINGSWORTH IS *PASTE*'S GAMES EDITOR.

Photo by Keith Klenowski

THE NEW PORNOGRAPHERS

Together

MATADOR
RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

Easy, breezy, beautiful

The New Pornographers have been so reliable for so long that they're easy to take for granted. Learning that the band's fifth album, *Together*, is their most oddly cohesive and stickiest yet is great but hardly remarkable news—the same has been said for almost all of their previous releases. What's surprising, though, is how loose and comfortable it all feels; the record is punchy, but it breathes easily with a kind of windows-open grace.

Grand opener "The Moves" roars alive and goes on to smash a few walls before plinking piano and sweeping harmonies settle in. Singer/songwriter A.C. Newman fuels the whole album with a recurring series of insistent staccato bangs (guitar, keys, voice), sometimes to ravenous effect ("A Bite Out Of My Bed") and sometimes just to add a little zip ("Sweet Talk, Sweet Talk"). The Dan Bejar-sung "Silver Jenny Dollar" seems like an homage to '90s alt-acoustic radio, with its "whoa-whoa-whoas" and an ephemeral girl-you-can-never-have; meanwhile, Neko Case's "My Shepherd" is an all-out torch song detailing some pretty serious emotional abuse: "You're my lord, you're my shepherd / Careful kitten, no one gets hurt / You made me this way." And it all comes together in grand, vicious unison on the closing blowout "We End Up Together."

This messy-pop template is nothing new for the Pornographers, but they've never applied it to such satisfying ends. Add in some guitarwork by St. Vincent's Annie Clark, a trumpet cameo from Beirut's Zach Condon, backing vocals by Okkervil River's Will Sheff and work by the ultra-reliable Dap-Kings, and it's the band's most colorful patchwork to date. **JEFF VRABEL**

8.0

Photo by Jason Creps

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MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER

The Age of Miracles

ZOE RECORDS
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Another woebegone rumination on life and love

In 2001, Mary Chapin Carpenter abandoned her sassy country twang to release *time* sex* love*, a brooding folk album filled with poignant musings and prayers for inner peace. After nine years and two albums of near-formulaic somber meditations, Carpenter is still trudging down that grueling path. Reprising her well-worn role as a pensive, wistful artist, Carpenter's latest is a pastiche of her respectable and nakedly honest earlier work. *The Age of Miracles* is almost laughably despondent, its few half-hearted attempts at pluck ("I Put My Ring Back On," "What You Look For") obscured by morose ballads, where "valleys of sorrow and tears" and "oceans of longing and years" blemish the lyrical landscape. Carpenter's weepy soul-searching makes *The Age of Miracles* feel like a cheap copy of the genuine introspection that made her previous records so intriguing. **GRAY CHAPMAN** **3.6**

CARIBOU

Swim

MERGE
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Swim to the surface

With his high, ghostly voice and ear for the eerie, Dan Snaith's dance collages are less the stuff of a Saturday night at the disco and more 4 a.m. in a dark, seedy club. Under his nom-de-plume Caribou, his 2008 Polaris Music Prize-winning *Andorra* melted a heavy helping of electronica over '60s garage rock, but *Swim* favors the former, with Snaith's repetitious vocals and synths quivering under the weight of a muffled bass. Snaith abandons both traditional song structures and rock sounds, and the album plays like a 43-minute musical kaleidoscope—bells, horns, handclaps, saxophone and piano all mixing with terse beats. The shadowy electronics flow from the subdued funk of opener "Odessa" through the slow-motion "Lalibela," leaving "Jamelia" as the lone rave-up. The song builds on blips and bleeps until Snaith howls the album's only shout-along chorus. Though a few more outbursts could've given *Swim* more punch, it stays afloat—austere, chilling and beautiful. **JUSTIN JACOBS** **8.5**

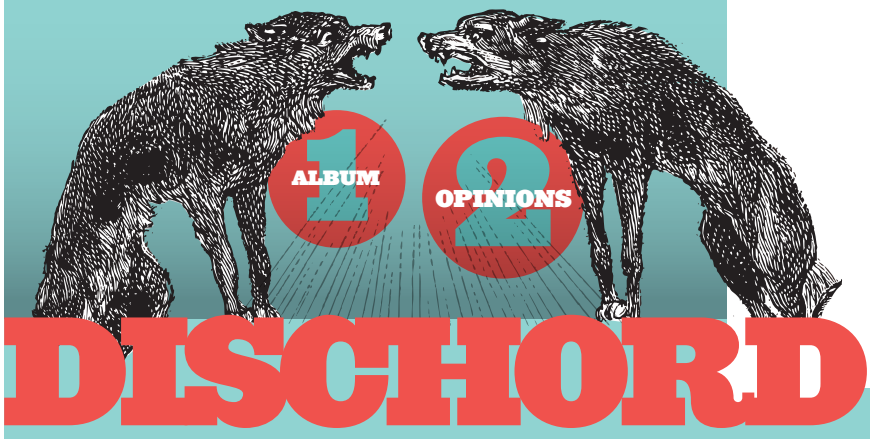
THE TALLEST MAN ON EARTH

The Wild Hunt

DEAD OCEANS
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Swedish Americana master lodges excellent sophomore LP

Kristian Matsson plays to his strengths on *The Wild Hunt*, his second album. It's a smart move. He keeps it simple, finger-picking strings to propel his gristly vocal melodies, which feel simultaneously cavalier and carefully wrought. Though his acoustic guitar often thwacks like a snare, his songs are uncluttered by percussion, harmonized vocals or the kinds of orchestral ornaments that are so prevalent in current alt-folk. The clean, galloping banjos and guitars spotlight his pristine snarl, which slips down into powerful bass notes and then reaches up and yelps on key, accentuating his ambitious, second-language lyrics: "I wasn't born, I just walked in one frosty morn / Into the vision of some vacant mind," he sings on "Burden of Tomorrow." If Sondre Lerche were a bluegrass-loving goblin, he might sound a little like this. Among the dead weights of the modern new-Dylans, Matsson is a real live wire. **BRIAN HOWE** **8.0**



DISCHORD

SHE & HIM

Volume Two

MERGE

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

TWICE AS NICE

She & Him's debut was a simple affair. Zooey Deschanel's homespun grace and M. Ward's unobtrusive production made for a winning combination—which means they risked a lot by making a followup album as complex and ambitious as this one. On *Volume Two*, swirling strings and lush backing vocals underscore Deschanel's increasingly sophisticated songwriting. She plays the dewy-eyed innocent a bit too faithfully at times, but there is no denying her legitimacy as a tunesmith, divvying her set between bouncy piano-pop, folk-flavored sing-alongs and orchestral anthems. In lesser hands, the *American Graffiti*-styled themes of star-crossed lovers and summer nights would drown in their own sincerity. Here, they provide a pleasant escape to a mythical America of endless horizons and youthful resilience—not such a bad place to be in 2010. **MATT FINK**

NEEDS SOME SPICE

With its nostalgic covers, wall-of-sound harmonies and sunny imagery, Zooey Deschanel and M. Ward's latest is a beguiling memory-picnic through a land where everyone is forgiving, self-deprecating and pleasant. "Well, alright / It's okay / We all get the slips sometimes every day / I'll just keep it to myself in the sun," Deschanel and her guest chorus of Tilly and the Wall members coo to a melodic waterfall of riffs. This stuff-it-away-and-smile attitude permeates the bulk of the album, so when Deschanel's voice dips to a quiet near-sob at the end of Skeeter Davis cover "Gonna Get Along Without You Now" it's as refreshing as a drink of water after a cotton-candy binge. But moments like this are few and far between on this fluffy, sugar-spun album. The smiling-through-tears undercurrent of '60s pop is lost in Deschanel's taffy-like vocals, and though the album evokes memories of a more pleasant time, they seem far too sweet to be real. **RACHEL DOVEY**

Photo by Taea Thale

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SPACE CASES

Androids dream of eclectic funk on Atlanta ingénue's debut

BY JUSTIN JACOBS

JANELLE MONÁE

The ArchAndroid

THE WONDALAND ARTS SOCIETY/BAD BOY

RELEASE DATE: MAY 18

Janelle Monáe's long-awaited debut album opens with the sounds of an orchestra tuning and some polite applause, then a sharp jab of strings, the rise of an ominous choir and flittering woodwinds. If you're sitting in front of the computer you just bought the record on, dressed in sweats and a t-shirt, you might feel underdressed.

And rightly so: *The ArchAndroid* is a fully immersive, theatrical experience. It's a near-perfect R&B album; hell, it's a fantastic hip-hop, psychedelic, neo-soul, dance and orchestral album too. It's hard to classify but harder to ignore, matching Monáe's massive stylistic scope and ambition with endless melodies, can't-help-but-smile jams and an all-star cast of guest artists, including Big Boi, Saul Williams, Deep Cotton and Of Montreal. The 18-track epic brings to mind Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life*; its stunning, sophisticated tunes spanning styles, speeds and sentiments, all tied together by a smorgasbord of artistic personalities.

From that moment in 2007 when Kansas City native Monáe introduced herself as an "alien from outer space / I'm a cyber girl without a face, a heart or a mind" (on "Violet Stars Happy Hunting" from her debut EP, *Metropolis: Suite I of IV*) it was clear she was more Bowie than Beyoncé. That EP was a tightly-wound funk-opera about an Alpha Platinum 9000 android on the run. Crafted under the tutelage of OutKast's Big Boi, *The ArchAndroid* follows a different story (also loosely inspired by the dystopic 1927 silent film *Metropolis*) but matches the energy of her earlier set, popping and sparkling all the same. Like the best concept albums, the plot is evident but never gets in the way; the bubbling sugar-pop of numbers like "Wondaland," an emotional android tale ("So inspired, you touch my wires, my supernova shining bright...Hallelujah"), is easy to pick out and digest on its own.

Where *Suite I* featured brassy future-funk throughout, *The ArchAndroid's* shape-shifting melodies are the equivalent of splatter art. Monáe is careful to work her way up to her more outré moments; after the orchestral opener "Overture II," *ArchAndroid*'s first three songs are an easy transition from *Suite I*'s theatrics. "Dance or Die" is tense, propulsive hip-hop with a spidery bassline and hushed vocals from fellow freak Saul Williams; "Faster" and "Locked Inside" continue the quick, skittering funk. But then "Cold War" hits like a lit match at a fireworks stand: It's her very own "Hey Ya!" moment, a simple and catchy burst of energy likely to inspire more dance-tantrums than smooth moves.

It's a near-perfect R&B album; hell, it's a fantastic hip-hop, psychedelic, neo-soul, dance and orchestral album too.

At the album's halfway point, Monáe knows she's got you hooked, so it's time to get weird. "Oh Maker" pairs vintage Mariah Carey-style crowing with playful, bouncing music. It's followed by "Come Alive (The War of the Roses)," an abrasive punk-guitar freak out; Monáe plays a great Iggy, screaming like a banshee about "dancing in a dungeon every Monday night ... like a schizo running wild." A collaboration with Of Montreal on "Make The Bus" is the album's only notable misstep. The hyperactive disco song isn't exactly gag-worthy, but it's lacking a crucial ingredient: Janelle Monáe. Of Montreal fromtman Kevin Barnes wrote the tune, giving it his band's trademark jittery, spastic syncopation instead of Monáe's soulful funk swagger. It's mixtape fodder on an otherwise perfectly assembled album.

The ArchAndroid is especially impressive for how early it arrives in Monáe's career. OutKast's similarly ambitious *Speakerboxx/The Love Below* came almost a decade after their debut; Stevie Wonder had recorded almost 20 albums before his mind exploded into *Key of Life*. Monáe may be an alien or an android, but if this is just the beginning, she may wind up a legend. **9.1**

Photo by Pier Nicola Damico

JAMIE LIDELL

Compass

WARP

RELEASE DATE: MAY 18

Neo-soulster does what he does best

On his fourth album, Jamie Lidell pays homage to everything from '60s funk to '90s R&B, blending pastiche with the glitchy production for which his record label has become known. *Compass* is as eclectic and bugged-out as his last album, *Jim*, was subdued, and there are plenty of throwbacks: "Enough's Enough" is blatant Jackson 5 worship, complete with one-two-threes and bouncing flutes, while "She Needs Me" evokes Boyz II Men with a cascading piano intro and Lidell's layered vocal swells. The title track, featuring Beck, would have felt at home on *Sea Change*, but most of his collaborators—including Feist, Gonzalez and Grizzly Bear's Chris Taylor—all but vanish in the delirious swirl of the music. Lidell's voice easily shifts from soul melisma to a more gruff, linear style, although several amped-up numbers ("You Are Waking," "Gypsy Blood") feel inert. Luckily, most of the album sticks to the kind of warped romantic confections and wild, simmering vamps he does best. **BRIAN HOWE** 7.5

GOGOL BORDELLO

Trans-Continental Hustle

COLUMBIA

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Innovative sound feels strained

Eugene Hütz's belligerent snarl has never been particularly easy on the ears, and when paired with Gogol Bordello's hodgepodge of punk and traditional Eastern European influences, it's often downright bizarre. On *Trans-Continental Hustle*, the group's fifth full-length album—and first major-label release—this aggressive weirdness isn't tempered in the slightest. From the outset, the band dares you to stomach a freakish amalgam of maniacal instrumentals and tempestuous beats without any apparent regard for aesthetic development; in opener "Pala Tute," Hütz greets listeners with Slavic folk guitars, a vigorous beat and a thick Ukranian accent, yet hurriedly rushes into that all-too-familiar hostility and ostentation that comprises the rest of the album. It seems Gogol Bordello is still stubbornly clutching for the inventiveness of earlier records like *Gypsy Punks: Underdog World Strike* and *Super Taranta!* without truly progressing, leaving us with a Rick Rubin-adorned imitation of their visionary past work. **GRAY CHAPMAN** 5.8

COURT YARD HOUNDS

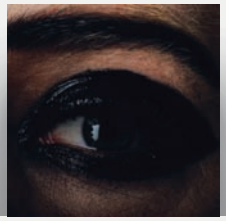
Court Yard Hounds

COLUMBIA

RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

Two Chicks take matters into their own hands

With their day-job band on indefinite hiatus, the two Dixie Chicks who aren't Natalie Maines started this side project to get some songs out of their system. Emily Robison takes the lead on vocals, while her sister Martie Maguire adds harmonies and fiddle jams. Though neither boasts Maines' forcefulness, they invest these tales of severed connections with an emotional intensity that elevates even weaker tracks like "Fairytale" and "Then Again." Documenting Robison's recent divorce, *Court Yard Hounds* takes the form of a Texas travelogue, starting in San Antonio with the plaintive "Skyline" before trekking south for "The Coast" and "See You in the Spring" (a sober break-up duet with Jakob Dylan). It can be a harrowing road trip, but the album reaches a poignant destination in the closer "Fear of Wasted Time," an ode to the joys and rewards of mother- and sisterhood. **STEPHEN M. DEUSNER** 7.6



RUFUS WAINWRIGHT

All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu

DECCA AVAILABLE NOW

No medicine for melancholy

Rufus Wainwright has never been one to shy away from drama. The crooner's inclination towards musical theatre is evident in his discography—the showy arrangements, the vibrato, the Judy Garland covers. But on his sixth solo release, *All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu*, Wainwright trades his usual Broadway pomp for a night at an intimate piano joint. Make no mistake, he's still the baritone warbler with a knack for making a scene. But this time, he's not laughing—he's crying.

Written during his mother Kate McGarrigle's struggle with cancer (she passed away earlier this year), *Songs for Lulu* sounds like the book-on-tape version of a tear-soaked journal. A dark cloud hangs over melancholy opening track "Who Are You New York?" and doesn't clear up for much of the album. Later, on the quivering, red-eyed "Zebulon," Wainwright sings, "My mother's in the hospital / My sister's at the opera / I'm in love but let's not talk about it / There's so much to tell you." On many of the tracks, the piano's sweet lullaby is betrayed by Wainwright's sorrowful words—usually a winning combination, but this isn't always an easy album to like. Songs like "Give Me What I Want And Give It To Me Now!" and "Sonnet 43" come off as unstable, self-indulgent and grating. They meander from verse to verse with nary a solid hook to latch onto; he's lost, they're lost. But Wainwright pours his full heart into these streams-of-consciousness, and in the end, you develop a certain affection for his meandering confessions.

Despite its woe-is-me vibe, *Songs for Lulu* is not a charity case. When he sticks to classic balladry and construction as on "True Loves" and "Les Feux D'Artifice T'Appellant" (an aria from his opera *Prima Donna*) Wainwright really shines. Only when he strays away from his strengths do you truly feel sorry for him. **LIZ STINSON** 6.6

REGINA CARTER

Reverse Thread

EI ENTERTAINMENT

RELEASE DATE: MAY 18

MacArthur Fellow makes good on promise of genius

When the MacArthur Foundation hands you $500,000 in unrestricted grant money to go out and explore your field of interest, you can afford to think outside the box. American jazz violinist Regina Carter did just that with her 2006 MacArthur "Genius Grant," using it to fund *Reverse Thread*, an album of 12 tracks inspired by ethnographic field recordings and traditional African music. The result showcases Carter's virtuosic abilities with her own instrument, and acclaimed kora player Yacouba Sissoko helps ground the music in the rich past it's meant to honor. With the addition of a very European-sounding accordion ("Un Aguinaldo Pa Regina") and jazz percussion, *Reverse Thread* often loses a sense of place—but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Carter set out to honor a traditional form of music by interpreting it through a contemporary lens, and her marriage of African and African-American music birthed a record that feels like something quite new. Perhaps that's the best tribute of all. **8.2**

RACHEL BAILEY

JOSH RITTER

So Runs the World Away

PYTHEAS RECORDINGS

RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

The best thing to happen to Idaho since the fry basket

Idaho native and Brooklyn transplant Josh Ritter hits a beautiful stride on his sixth album, a soulful combination of conversational folk ballads and powerful gut punches. Ritter's the kind of artist that will always draw comparisons to legends like Bob Dylan and contemporaries like Ryan Adams—and while *So Runs the World Away* contains a handful of songs that make those comparisons easy, he also sounds very much like himself and never sways from his unmistakable cadence. He whispers on "The Curse," stomps on "The Remnant" and, yes, matter-of-factly evokes Dylan on "Folk Bloodbath" when he explains with scratchy sincerity, "That's the sad thing with life / There's people always leavin' just as other folks arrive." He's not the only one channeling the greats, but he does it better than almost anyone else today. **8.3**

JENNA WOGINRICH

BROKEN SOCIAL SCENE

Forgiveness Rock Record

ARTS & CRAFTS

RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

Canadian collective's latest is just too much

The last time I saw Broken Social Scene live, in November 2008, what struck me most about the loosely arranged collective's sound was how jammy it had become. Previously taut three-minute rock songs unspooled into meandering epics, to sometimes-exhilarating and sometimes-exhausting results. Two years later, the band has given this frustrating sound a name: *Forgiveness Rock Record*. Whereas BSS' two previous albums indulge the group's pop sensibilities while showcasing its knack for rock anthems, *Forgiveness* cremates and scatters these strengths over an intimidating and overwrought runtime. For every driving, vibrant track ("Forced to Love" and the aptly named "Chase Scene"), the band forces others that are ponderous at best ("All to All") and pointless at worst ("Highway Slipper Jam"). Perhaps Tortoise's John McEntire, who co-produced *Forgiveness*, imbued his noodling post-rock tendencies on a group that was already itching to stretch out; perhaps BSS just needs to reign it in. Regardless, brace yourself for how this record will translate live—we're in for some slow jams. **5.5**

AUSTIN L. RAY

RACHAEL SAGE
DELANCEY STREET
The brand new album from Independent Music Award winner RACHAEL SAGE!
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"deeply talented... rebellious" KEYBOARD
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SWEET APPLE

Love & Desperation

TEE PEE RECORDS

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Alt-rock all-stars swing hard, hit some

The first seconds of Sweet Apple's debut barrel forth with an onslaught of dirty rock 'n' roll; the four-piece, don't-call-them-a-supergroup spews an avalanche of trash reminiscent of the New York Dolls' hostile proto-punk. J Mascis, frontman of the hallowed Dinosaur Jr., has traded in his guitar for drums, pummeling through *Love & Desperation* with jarring force. Sweet Apple throbs with a swaggering garage-rock bravado that's more evocative of guitarists Tim Parnin and John Petkovic's group Cobra Verde than Mascis' iconic band. Traces of dark belligerence also recall Witch, the doom metal band in which Sweet Apple's namesake/bassist Dave Sweetapple first collaborated with Mascis. The album has explosive highs, like "Flying Up a Mountain," but they're coupled with stale lows (the tedious "It's Over Now") that threaten to dilute its overall virulence. But despite its moments of lethargy, *Love & Desperation* quakes with an energy that's simultaneously exhausting and gratifying. **GRAY CHAPMAN** 7.0

GARY LUCAS AND DEAN BOWMAN

Chase the Devil

KNITTING FACTORY

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Bluesy duo starts Third Great Awakening

Downtown Scene veterans Gary Lucas and Dean Bowman are in pursuit of the Devil on this fiery whiskey-shot of a gospel album—they're just not sure what they're going to do when they catch him. Bible-referencing lyrics imply they'd like to send him straight back to the inferno whence he came, but the scorching riffs, maniacal clapping and inhuman yodels suggest they might just want to party. The songs range from Holy Roller riots to quiet, lost-in-the-mist trances; on "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground / This May Be The Last Time," Lucas slowly plucks his steel strings while Bowman, sounding as though his eyes have rolled all the way back in his head, yelps a series of incomprehensible vowels. On "Nobody's House" Bowman sports his blues chops with a "Lordy-lordy-lordy-lordy-lordy" that climbs the scales as though each note were a rung in Jacob's Ladder, and Lucas shows off his Captain Beefheart training with frantic chords. Like any tent revival, this album is a blend of the scared and insane, complete only when everyone has reached a state of frantic holiness or utter possession. **RACHEL DOVEY** 8.5

MINUS THE BEAR

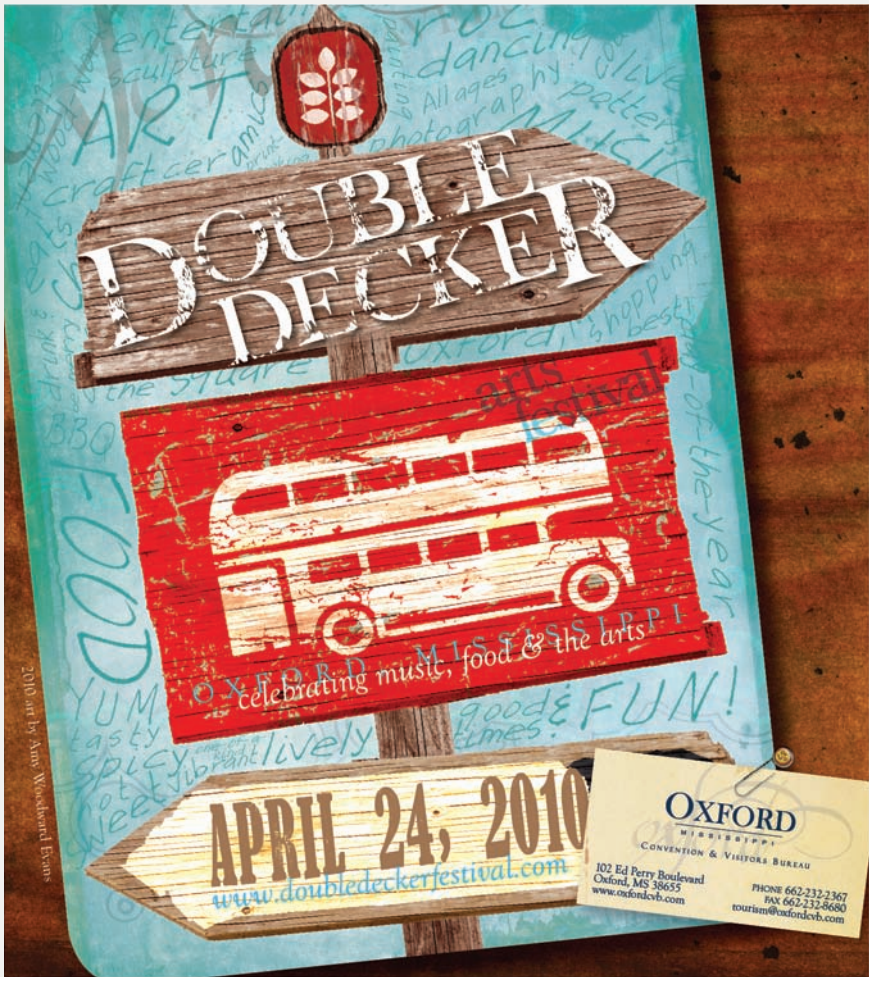
OMNI

DANGERBIRD

RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

Former noodlers climb a wall of sound

Dave Knudson's mathcore-metal roots have long been evident in Minus the Bear's guitar work, his complex riffs squiggling and writhing through the band's woozy sex jams. But where previous albums were largely headphone affairs, fourth LP *OMNI* is a record to rupture speakers. Knudson's noodling has evolved into heavier, tighter riffing, allowing his Bear bandmates to flex; the result is the group's most explosive record since its 2002 debut *Highly Refined Pirates*. Jake Snider's lyrics are as bedroom-obsessed as always, but *OMNI*'s neon-metallic groove fits his libido well. Lead track "My Time" is a musical strobe light of skittering synths and guitar effects, opening with Snider's oh-so-subtle come-on "Turn off the lights, and touch me in the dark." Snider verges on sophomoric when he sings "Running out of excuses, when we know what the truth is / I'm into you" on "Excuses," but layered atop Knudson's gorgeous windchime guitar, it's easy to share the attraction. **JUSTIN JACOBS** 7.9



RUSKO

O.M.G.!

MAD DECENT
RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

Dubstep without boundaries

Like all genres, dance music moves in phases. The sound of the moment is dubstep, a brutal British movement led by faceless blokes with names like Caspa and The Bug, and characterized by wobbling basslines that hum like a moving lightsaber. It's a menacing sound, an oscillating drone that pounds you into submission.

The U.K. beatsmith Rusko is a titan of the genre, having broken through with the 2008 single "Cockney Thug," which piled syncopated drums atop that furious drone, punctuating the whole thing with shrill whistles that might as well have been criss-crossing bottle rockets. At one point the whole song stopped, and a British-accented voice blurted out "I 'avent got a *clue* what's going on."

Released on Diplo's Mad Decent label, Rusko's new album is even more disorienting—in a good way. Refusing to bend to its own genre's conventions, it plays like a mash-up of every major dance movement of the last 30-plus years. "Feels So Real" warps a disco beat. "Kumon Kumon" is a straight-up jungle track. "Rubadub Shakedown" chatters like reggae, then downshifts into a funk groove. "Got Da Groove" dabbles in hip-hop, with vocals from ubiquitous Atlanta rapper Gucci Mane. "Do U Wanna Have A Party" delivers a crushing bass drop and a quacking duck.

Rusko is big on unexpected sound effects; he also implements laser guns and shattering glass and the telltale squawk of a connecting fax machine. But the glue that binds the album is that signature dubstep beat, which takes on a surprising number of forms and conjures an unexpected array of emotions. It can underpin a diva, as it does for Dirty Projectors' Amber Coffman on "Hold On." But it can also do what it does late in the album on "You're On My Mind Baby"—pulse way down in the mix, a low thrum holding steady like an idling engine, ready at any moment to crank up. **NICK MARINO**

8.4

Photo by Dan Wilton

HARPER BLYNN

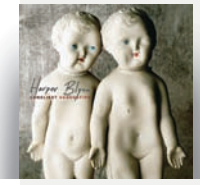
Loneliest Generation

BABY JACKAL RECORDS

RELEASE DATE: MAY 11

A good first impression

Loneliest Generation was produced by David Kahne, who also helmed the Strokes' *First Impressions of Earth*. Harper Blynn is just as catchy as that notorious garage quintet, but with a kinder view of the world, answering The Strokes' cynical *Is This It* with the can-do "This Is It." Standout track "25 Years" has ringing hooks and an infectious synth line, the title track is a state-of-youth anthem evocative of the pop-soul of Hall & Oates and slow-burners, like filmy acoustic number "The Doubt," drip lovely, trailing harmonies. The lyrics are brief remembrances, slices of life and seize-the-day exhortations, full of effectively spun truisms: "I was taught to count my blessings twice," Pete Harper and J. Blynn sing on gentle piano ballad "All Pretenders." Harper Blynn sports a savvy modern-pop sheen and indelible hooks that recall Roman Candle; hopefully, they won't be similarly overlooked. **BRIAN HOWE** 7.7



THE HOLD STEADY

Heaven Is Whenever

VAGRANT RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

The wonder years

The Hold Steady's great gift used to be the ability to transform adolescence into something that holds within its unbearable awkwardness the irreplaceable magic of discovery. But on its magnificent fifth album, the band has finally grown up a little, and singer/narrator Craig Finn sounds like a spectator in the grandstands, taking in the game and issuing casual advice to the kids on field: "You can't kiss every girl," he sings with near-fatherly earnestness on "Soft in the Center." The songs, meanwhile, sound bigger than before, his bandmates compensating for the departure of keyboardist Franz Nicolay by installing bayou guitars ("The Sweet Part of the City"), Dixieland breakdowns ("Barely Breathing") and—all together now—more cowbell ("The Smidge"). One might suspect that The Hold Steady's rock repurposing would eventually chafe, but they're achieving the opposite effect, again pulling off with heroic sincerity the idea that heaven is lying on the floor listening to records—even if you're well past 16. **JEFF VRABEL** 8.0

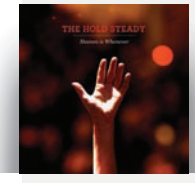
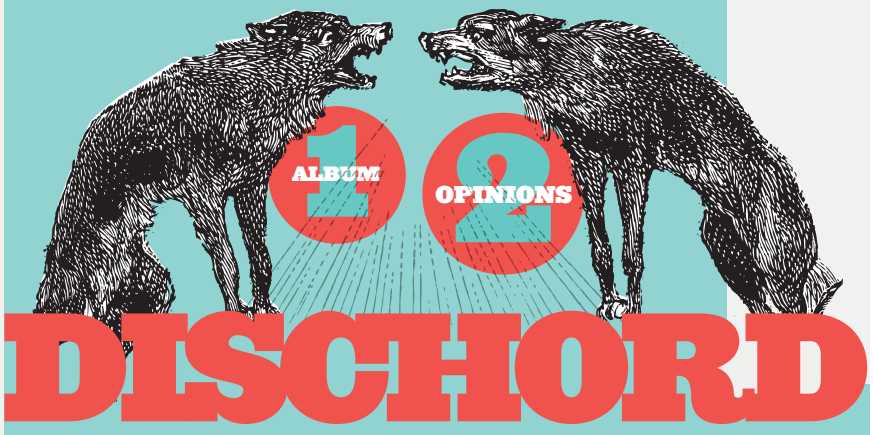


Photo by Josh Cheuse



MGMT

Congratulations

COLUMBIA

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

SURF'S UP

Like a beach bum tearing off his clothes before diving into the ocean, MGMT sheds its electronic sheen and pop hooks on its second LP, *Congratulations*—and, with that, the accessibility of debut *Oracular Spectacular*. Cowbells and organ chords set the frenetic pace for this crazed and eerie take on surf music that namechecks the godfather of ambient in its punkest track ("Brian Eno"). But in between enlightened ramblings, the band interjects a refrain that bursts forth brighter than a July sun ("Someone's Missing") and cues up psychedelic movements that wash ashore like the calmest of waves ("Siberian Breaks"). These moments form an undertow, luring you in and keeping you immersed. Once the sonic tide breaks and recedes, MGMT is left standing, quite solidly, on new shores. **CHRISTINA LEE**

WIPE OUT

Congratulations, MGMT, you have made a truly ridiculous record! (They had to live up to that album cover somehow, right?) Reader, you know how groups like The Flaming Lips and Of Montreal—truly great bands with genuine, experimental talent—can, when left to their own devices, go a bit too far? MGMT is like some nightmarish amalgam of those bands' bottom-barrel ideas set to wanky synths, sometimes for up to 12 minutes (!!!) at a time. The interminable mess in question, "Siberian Breaks," is a nadir that band member Andrew VanWyngarden (even his name is excessive) told *Spin* is about "surfing in the Arctic Circle." That's what these guys write about: surfing in the Arctic Circle. The very next track is titled "Brian Eno." Pro-tip, dudes: His Holiness Eno's name is off limits, especially when you write a song that evokes it in a way that is, at best, an embarrassing novelty. Who could possibly take this album seriously? **AUSTIN L. RAY**

BIG LOVE

Lush, lovely misanthrophy ages well

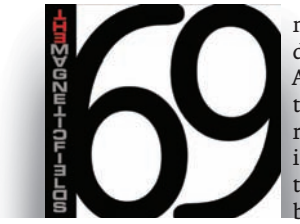
BY JEFF VRABEL

MAGNETIC FIELDS

69 Love Songs

MERGE

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW



Shopping for music reissues is like hitting the sundae buffet on your birthday: It's one of the few times you are allowed, if not obligated, to put aside your cares about portion size. In the world of repackaged albums, volume is king, sets are super-sized and few demos are considered too scruffy for inclusion. The most bank-breaking reissue of Pearl Jam's *Ten*, for example, came with dueling mixes of the album, a live DVD, a vinyl LP, a replica cassette of Vedder's early demos, some recipes, a coupon for 50 percent off your second pair of shoes, Six Flags tickets and a Don Mattingly rookie card; an apparently sizable audience was once even heard clamoring for 22 outtakes from the Gin Blossoms' *New Miserable Experience*.

Magnetic Fields' spry, sprawling *69 Love Songs* album was no small investment in its original proportions, and its three 23-track discs—each loaded end-to-end with near-comprehensive coverage of the highs and horrors of love—cemented Stephin Merritt's standing as a kind of misanthropic dark knight. And so, while the recently-reissued version is plus-sized—the whole shebang comprised of six vinyl LPs (plus a code to download the remastered MP3s)—this new, limited-run package features no outtakes, no demos, no live cuts, no extra anything. It makes sense, as anything more would bungle the math. Plus, Merritt doesn't exactly seem like the kind of guy who would throw open his journals. "He made Lou Reed look like Little Orphan Annie," says author Neil Gaiman in the trailer for the newly released, decade-in-the-making documentary *Strange Powers: Stephin Merritt and the Magnetic Fields*.

This new, limited-run package features no outtakes, no demos, no live cuts—no extra anything. It makes sense, as anything more would bungle the math. Plus, Merritt doesn't exactly seem like the kind of guy who would throw open his journals.

And anyway, as you may remember, the original record is really, really good—an elegantly dour and richly rewarding indie-Broadway monster that likely originated the term "unboyfriendable" and contains one of the world's only instances of a banjo-based showtune containing the line, "It makes me drink beeeeeer." Love being dumb and timeless, the sentiments of *69 Love Songs* are just as potent today as they were in 1999 (or, for that matter, in 999), all smushed and mixed up and gender-bent. Giddiness ("A Chicken with Its Head Cut Off") is plopped right next to broken hipster sneering ("How Fucking Romantic") which sits next to shivering heartbreak ("Come Back from San Francisco") which shares a bench with unabashed sex talk ("Let's Pretend We're Bunny Rabbits")—all without any hint of cognitive dissonance.

But while the dramatics are fun, the set's lasting power comes from how Merritt so consistenly relates these brutal love stories with such an incredible economy of language It's not easy, for instance, to pull off a Broadway homage that's also a Broadway song and call it "Busby Berkeley Dreams," and yet that track is bracing and gorgeous and sounds like it has been around for a hundred years.

After all this time, the most surprising thing is Merritt's stark, almost distant self-assuredness. He allows himself the occasional clunky lyric ("A pretty girl is like a violent crime / If you do it wrong you could do time / But if you do it right it is sublime," from the Irving Berlin love note "A Pretty Girl Is Like") like he's daring you to call him on it, and he knows you won't. And the album's centerpieces—the potent "Nothing Matters When We're Dancing," the noble "The Book of Love" and the synthetic smoochfest "The Luckiest Guy on the Lower East Side"—will sound just as fresh 10 years from now as they did 10 years ago.

What the *69 Love Songs* reissue might lack in bonus features, it makes up for with the allure of rarity—only 3,000 sets will be produced. It seems the point isn't just to hear the songs again. It's that those who would most wish to drink in such lush, lovely misanthropy should do so in style.

9.4

Photo courtesy of Merge Records

JEFF VRABEL IS A SOUTH CAROLINA-BASED MUSIC WRITER.

THE STOOGES

Raw Power

COLUMBIA/LEGACY
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

Running raw

At this point, it's almost cliché to heap plaudits upon The Stooges' 1973 album *Raw Power*, but its recent re-release in the form of a new two-disc Legacy Edition and a three-disc Deluxe Edition gives us even more reasons to keep doing just that. Both packages feature a live recording of the band's 1973 Atlanta performance called Georgia Peaches, which (aside from showcasing Iggy Pop's bellicose stage presence and his desire to stick things into other people's asses) boasts superb piano and bass presence. It also demonstrates the band's great contradiction—how it sounded great even at the height of dysfunction. The best part of both packages is Mark Wilder's remaster of *Raw Power*, which finally delivers a beefy, satisfying mix to replace the famously disastrous mixing done by David Bowie in 1972, and later by Iggy Pop in 1996. This slick new edition furthers the case for *Raw Power* as The Stooges' greatest work—as if there was any question. **8.5**

MARIO AGUILAR

PAVEMENT

Quarantine The Past: The Best Of Pavement

MATADOR
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

Old, gold soundz

Quarantine The Past is a quintessential Pavement title—cryptically self-skewering and cagily ironic. Back in the '90s, the quintet made guitars sound like ambivalent shrugs and bratty convulsions, and wore their thwarted ambition like a badge of honor. Listen to any current band that recasts classic rock as a shambling, sensitive, brainy thing and you'll see Pavement's influence. This retrospective won't do much for fans with a clear memory of the last decade of the 20th century, but it's ideal for youngsters who want to get acquainted with their favorite band's favorite band without wading through gigabytes of ephemera. Mixing deathless classics ("Here," "Gold Soundz," "Range Life,") with a few non-album gems ("Frontwards"), it's a near-ideal primer on the savviest slacker-rock band ever. **7.8**

BRIAN HOWE

JIMI HENDRIX

Valleys of Neptune

LEGACY RECORDINGS
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

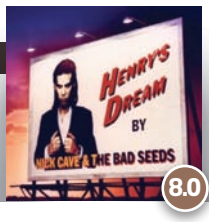
Way past experienced

It's been nearly four decades since Jimi Hendrix laid down his Stratocaster forever, and three since the release of his first posthumous LP *Crash Landing*. Enter *Valleys of Neptune*, a grimy, blues-slicked collection of previously unreleased tracks and deep cuts plucked from the Experience Hendrix group's studio vaults. The album's crisp production captures every nuance of Hendrix's technical wizardry—drums snap and guitars burble in simpatico, offering a hazy and heavy backdrop to road-trip yarns ("Stone Free"), flirtations with bluegrass ("Crying Blue") and show-stopping covers ("Sunshine of Your Love" and "Bleeding Heart"). These callbacks to classic Hendrixian themes make the album more than just a compilation of new and rare material. *Neptune* is a portrait of the greatest guitarist of all time at his peak; though the man is long dead, the undeniable vitality and power of Hendrix's creative spirit endures. **8.9**

MICHAEL SABA

8.2

7.8



8.0

NICK CAVE & THE BAD SEEDS

Tender Prey ***The Good Son*** ***Henry's Dream***

MUTE RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Gleaming like a shiny new guillotine

The second round of what will eventually be a complete set of Nick Cave reissues is filled with death and grief and sorrow and murder and rising corpses and ghost-ship chanteys and devil women and show tunes born in hell. It rules, of course. Besides showcasing a guy who's fully comfortable with his hallucinogenic gift for literate terror, the silky-black woe-bringer's fifth, sixth and seventh albums also mark his sneaky descent into a wittier, more accessible kind of cabaret-blues. These three records (released between 1988 and 1992) birthed Cave's seminal dead-man-walking monologue "The Mercy Seat," but they're also home to his straightforward, still-potent romantic notions displayed on "Loom Of The Land" and the lovely goth-first-dance song "Straight To You." A couple of dated '90s synthetics aside, this era is well-stocked with timeless, majestic and icy tales like "Jack the Ripper," "John Finn's Wife" and "Foi Na Cruz," just a few testaments to Cave's fast-evolving ability to shine both light and darkness. And with each two-disc set featuring re-mastered stereo tracks, B-sides, videos and a new short film, the reissue does more than just blow dust off the coffin. **JEFF VRABEL**

COMING OF MIDDLE-AGE

Noah Baumbach doesn't get old

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

GREENBERG

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

DIRECTOR: Noah Baumbach
WRITERS: Baumbach (Screenplay),
STARRING: Leigh, Ben Stiller, Rhys Ifans, Greta Gerwig, Brie Larson
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Harris Savides
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Focus Features, 107 mins.

The Los Angeles of *Greenberg*—the latest character portrait from *The Squid and the Whale* writer/director Noah Baumbach—is crammed with strip malls, old Hollywood grills and florescent-lit donut shops; a scrappy counterpoint to the glistening condos and clubs of *The Hills*. The city's worn, dusty streets suit Roger Greenberg (Ben Stiller), a forty-ish carpenter from New York visiting the Left Coast to house-sit for his brother Phillip (Chris Messina), currently on vacation in Vietnam with his picture-perfect family.

While in town, Greenberg becomes entangled in a peculiar relationship with Phillip's wide-eyed personal assistant, Florence (Greta Gerwig), an awkward twenty-something with a deficit of gumption and a surplus of overcautiousness. He also revisits a broken friendship with former bandmate Ivan (Rhys Ifans). But Greenberg is mostly intent on "doing nothing," a goal he fails to further delineate: "That's brave, at our age," comments his ex-girlfriend Beth (Jennifer Jason Leigh), practically dripping with pity.

Eventually we find out that before coming to L.A., Greenberg completed a stint in a mental hospital. Baumbach's script keeps the details vague, but it seems he's in a state of permanent adolescence, wallowing in selfishness and vitriol. Witness the new manhood: Greenberg's afternoons consist of reliving his time in an almost-was college rock band, shuffling around in a graying Steve Winwood T-shirt (which winkingly declares "Back in the High Life Again"), engineering mix CDs for Florence, composing grocery lists ("whiskey, ice cream sandwiches"), writing gnashing letters to corporations and crafting a doghouse for his brother's ailing pooch, Mahler. Greenberg's autonomy is compromised by the fact that he can't drive (also the bane of every 15-year-old in America) and his dedication to walking becomes a metaphor for his increasing sense of alienation and childishness.

Greenberg isn't particularly likeable, but Stiller's portrayal is just charismatic and mixed-up enough to make him an oddly sympathetic presence—no matter how many relationships he bungles, it's hard not to relate. After all, most adult humans have overdosed on ennui at one point or another, or found ourselves stuck living a life we didn't anticipate and feeling powerless to correct. (It also helps that Baumbach allows the narcissistic Greenberg temporary custody of a sick dog, a successful empathy-grabbing coup.) Florence is played with impressive and convincing innocence by the mesmerizing Gerwig, and her affection for Greenberg seems rooted in her own quarter-life crisis. As different as they are, they're both searching for a savior: "It's weird, aging, right?" Greenberg asks at his three-person birthday party, in one of the movie's most spectacularly weird (and telling) scenes.

LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy wrote and performed the score, which captures the film's modern dissociation. Murphy's "All My Friends" from 2007's *Sound of Silver* pops up in the film's trailer, and feels like it could have been composed specifically for the film: "You spent the first five years trying to get with the plan, and the next five years trying to be with your friends again," Murphy howls over anxious keyboards.

Baumbach has a history of writing movies about overeducated white people who just don't want to grow up (most notably 1995's *Kicking and Screaming*)—his narrative specialty is clearly middle-class disaffection. But *Greenberg* is also a remarkably funny and charming film, one which captures the vague, gnawing restlessness that plagues its characters. The veracity of those problems belies how mundane they occasionally seem, and production designer Ford Wheeler's attention to detail only adds to the atmospherics. Even Florence's shoddy studio apartment—with its plastic blinds, hand-me-down saucepan and Scotch-taped photos—feels beautifully real.

8.6

Greenberg photo courtesy of Focus Features

AMANDA PETRUSICH IS A *PASTE* SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

THE JONESES

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

DIRECTOR/WRITER: Derrick Borte
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Yaron Orbach
STARRING: David Duchovny, Demi Moore, Amber Heard
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Roadside Attractions, 93 min.

Anti-consumerist satire packs big value

With *The Joneses*, first-time director Derrick Borte covers the same anti-materialist turf as Michael Moore and Chuck Palahniuk before him. But while his intentions may be derivative, his premise—a family of vapid commercial models is planted in a McMansion commune—somehow feels original. Think of it as an inverted *Truman Show*, with David Duchovny and Demi Moore as yuppified secret salesmen hawking an idealized suburban lifestyle while incognito. And like the brilliant *Truman*, Borte knows when to stop preaching and tell a compelling story. Underneath the Joneses' Teflon veneers lay the repressed, three-dimensional personas of people with very unmarketable flaws. And when these fragile humanisms begin to leak (and eventually flood), Borte really shines. DeVotchKa frontman Nick Urata's bittersweet score makes this snappy parable an even better deal. **SEAN EDGAR** 8.6

PLEASE GIVE

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

DIRECTOR/WRITER: Nicole Holofcener
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Yaron Orbach
STARRING: Catherine Keener, Rebecca Hall, Amanda Peet, Oliver Platt, Sarah Steele
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Sony Pictures Classics, 90 min.

Whining and pining in New York

Nicole Holofcener's fourth film begins with some of the saddest breasts ever committed to film, as a radiology technician (Rebecca Hall) administers a series of mammograms. It's the film's cleverest sequence, a comic desexualizing of human flesh. It's also a feint, as Holofcener is not interested in any of the boob's symbolic virtues. Her story is about that most tedious of subjects: white, liberal, upper-class New York guilt. Catherine Keener's middle-aged antique dealer wants to save the world through donations to homeless people, even as her own life falls apart. As her relationships deteriorate with her husband (an understated Oliver Platt), daughter (a luminous Sarah Steele) and her neighbor's granddaughters (Hall and Amanda Peet), *Please Give* asks how one person can improve the world, but the takeaway is more "circle the wagons" than "act locally." The cast occasionally finds nuggets of wisdom in this material, usually when Hall is on screen: Her guarded smile and lively eyes are the brightest moments in an otherwise tiresome film. **STEPHEN M. DEUSNER** 5.5

The Joneses photo by Gene Page

MISPLACED AFFECTIONS

Strong acting and weak directing leave erotic thriller with more fizzle than sizzle

BY TED LACIENEGA

CHLOE

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

DIRECTOR: Atom Egoyan
PRODUCER: Ivan Reitman
WRITER: Erin Cressida Wilson
STARRING: Julianne Moore, Liam Neeson, Amanda Seyfried
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Sony Pictures Classics, 99 min.

An erotic thriller can't be good if it's neither erotic nor thrilling—and *Chloe* is barely either. The film stars two Oscar-caliber actors, Julianne Moore and Liam Neeson, plus the best actress from *Big Love*, Amanda Seyfried, all directed by Atom Egoyan. I walked in hoping for something in the vein of *Fatal Attraction*. Unfortunately, halfway through the film, I found myself thinking about *Poison Ivy*.

If you don't remember *Poison Ivy*—and why would you—it's about a crazy-eyed Drew Barrymore seducing her new friend's dad, played by Tom Skerritt. It was laughable, and it was supposed to be. *Chloe* isn't supposed to be, yet a handful of cringe-worthy moments prompted some misplaced giggles from the audience.

Chloe's narrative centers on an older couple's malaise in a 21st century world of intercepted text messages and suspicious IM sessions. In this case, successful OB/GYN Catherine (Julianne Moore) is trying to inject some much-needed passion into her marriage to her wandering-eyed professor husband David (Liam Neeson). She throws him a surprise party—which he doesn't attend because he "missed his plane." He really *did* miss his plane, but she's suspicious, and eventually intercepts an illicit text message between David and a young co-ed. In a self-punishing move, she hires the titular escort Chloe (Amanda Seyfried) to tempt David—and because clearly it's impossible for any red-blooded man to resist a secret rendezvous with Amanda Seyfried in the local greenhouse, it works!

Moore and Neeson deliver vérité portrayals of the tensions that often arise in long-term relationships. There's a heart-breaking scene where the couple contemplates when and why they stopped picking each other up at the airport; you think that they're going to fall into bed together, but they stop just short, as though their marriage is utterly beyond salvaging. Egoyan neatly paints Moore's character into a corner where all she sees is beauty and youth passing and fading. The cinematography perfectly captures the grandeur of Toronto, further underpinning this point. You can see the pain in Moore's eyes (and the slight wrinkles that surround them) as she sees all of the gorgeous men and women who flit into and out of her orbit. You can understand why she needs to find some answers in a life she fears is quickly passing her by.

Chloe is an intriguing psychodrama trapped inside of the body of an erotic thriller.

But in the end, Egoyan's clinical style just isn't right for this script. *Chloe* is an intriguing psychodrama trapped inside of the body of an erotic thriller. I wanted to learn more about Chloe, as opposed to her just being a cookie-cutter crazy girl with a curiously-beloved hairpin. I wanted the sexuality to bubble over on-screen, like it does in all good erotic thrillers. I wanted the last five minutes to not force me to bring up *Poison Ivy* in this review. Because that's not what you want from your arthouse bedroom drama. Unless you secretly titillate to *Poison Ivy*. In which case, *Chloe* is perfect.

6.0

Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

THE SQUARE

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

DIRECTOR: Nash Edgerton
WRITERS: Joel Edgerton, Matthew Dabner
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Brad Shield
STARRING: David Roberts, Claire van der Boom, Joel Edgerton, Anthony Hayes
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Apparition, 101 min.

Round hole, square peg

Raymond (David Roberts) and Carla (Claire van der Boom) are married, and having affairs. They're also involved in embezzlement and robbery, and are considering running away with the proceeds of their crimes at the earliest opportunity. Their attempt to escape with their loot and lucre involves burning down Carla's house to destroy the evidence of their crimes, but soon more and more parties learn of their schemes. Director Nash Edgerton ably steers this crime thriller into progressively darker territory, but *The Square* lacks bite—it's nearly impossible to care about what happens to the couple. The movie's protagonists (and all of its supporting characters) are reprehensible people, and Roberts' performance is fascinatingly uncharismatic, extinguishing any possibility of sympathy for his character even when the film gradually reveals his town to be populated entirely by borderline sociopaths. The Edgertons seem to think the movie is about the ends to which we'll go for love, but *The Square*'s characters only love themselves. 4.2

SEAN GANDERT

THE SECRET IN THEIR EYES (EL SECRETO DE SUS OJOS)

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW (LIMITED)

DIRECTOR: Juan José Campanella
WRITERS: Campanella, Eduardo Sacheri
STARRING: Ricardo Darín, Soledad Villamil, Pablo Rago, Javier Godino, Guillermo Francella
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Félix Monti
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Sony Pictures Classics, 127 min.

A great secret

For its first hour, *The Secret in Their Eyes* is a conventional crime thriller focusing on the investigation of a rape/murder case that goes awry in exactly the ways audiences have learned to expect: with a frame-up, red tape and bad luck preventing the suspect's arrest. And then writer-director Juan José Campanella takes the gloves off and delivers one of the most virtuosic chase sequences ever filmed, followed by a steady trickle of new mysteries. New light is shed on previous events with the criminal's arrest and subsequent release, effectively starting the film anew while questioning both Argentinean politics and the boundaries of ethical justice. Campanella's classical style is assisted by a nuanced performance from his longtime collaborator Ricardo Darín, who brings gravity to the investigation and the somewhat-less-interesting love stories that surround it. Though slow at times, *The Secret in Their Eyes* recaptures the greatness of its genre,

The Secret in Their Eyes photo by Maria Antolini

and does so without mimicking or replicating its predecessors. 7.9

SEAN GANDERT

BREAKING UPWARDS

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW (LIMITED)

DIRECTOR: Daryl Wein
WRITERS: Wein, Zoe Lister-Jones
STARRING: Wein, Lister-Jones, Julie White, Andrea Martin
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Mister Lister, 88 min.

Longest. Break-up. Ever.

The first 40 seconds of *Breaking Upwards* are the film's most tortuous. Daryl (Daryl Wein) lays horizontally over Zoe (Zoe Lister-Jones), and can barely muster the energy for coital thrusts. Zoe, sighing, tells him to go ahead and come: "Really, it's fine." Based on the true story of the co-stars' relationship, this SXSW selection follows the twenty-something New Yorkers as they ease out of their shared yoga classes and into a break-up by "taking days off" from one another. An original conceit, but the rest of the film trudges through the familiar break-up playbook: Zoe often calls Daryl in tears, Daryl wants to know where Zoe is, and lingering glances toward strangers indicate inevitable hook-ups. The entirety of *Breaking Upwards* is nearly as joyless and dull as the first 40 seconds, and as it drags on, the film seems unable to do what Zoe wanted from the start—finish, already. 5.3

CHRISTINA LEE

7 DAYS (LES SEPT JOURS DU TALION)

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

DIRECTOR: Daniel Grou
STARRING: Rémy Girard, Claude Legault
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Bernard Couture
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Sundance Selects (Video-on-Demand), 105 min.

Half-baked Haneke

The Québécois film *7 Days* prods the same nerves that contemporary Gallic guignols have been working since Gaspar Noe's *Irreversible*, but it should have prodded more. The film begins with an unforgivable crime—the rape and murder of a schoolgirl by a convicted sex offender. Her father, a wealthy surgeon (Claude Legault), chains the alleged killer in a secluded dungeon, savoring his captive's (Rémy Girard) slow torture. As the film gingerly shifts the balance between good and evil, it takes on the tone of a Michael Haneke-directed *CSI* episode—but it's half-baked, at best. Despite Girard's cagey performance and a zinger of a third-act twist, the dramatic arc is too low-key, and the moral debate never extends beyond the immediate situation. It's ineffective exploitation and social critique—though if you swapped out the leads for Harrison Ford and Paul Giamatti, it'd probably mess a lot of people up. 5.7

STEVE DOLLAR

BLACK PRAIRIE

Available Now

SUGAR HILL

blackprairie.com
sugarhillrecords.com

BABIES

RELEASE DATE: MAY 7

DIRECTOR: Thomas Balmès
PRODUCERS: Alain Chabat, Amandine Billot, Christine Rouxel
STARRING: Ponijao, Bayar, Mari, Hattie
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Focus Features, 79 min.

The kids are alright

If you're averse to cute things—raindrops, roses, whiskers on kittens etc.—then *Babies* probably isn't for you. Directed by Thomas Balmès, this beautifully shot film follows four infants (one each in Namibia, Mongolia, Tokyo and San Francisco) from birth to their first steps. The children have no dialogue, obviously, and their parents have minimal roles. But *Babies* offers surprising moments of both tension and humor: Bayar, in Mongolia, is left alone in a field among cows; a grumpy Mari in Tokyo struggles with a toy; Hattie in San Francisco masters the art of banana eating; and the daily rituals of Ponijao and her family in Namibia are fascinating if only because their culture of communal child-rearing is so far removed from Western practices. *Babies* is billed as nonfiction and not as a documentary; the film is devoid of narrative structure, and makes a point to side-step the grumpy underbelly of child-rearing. Yet it still offers a clear and resonant message of common, shared humanity, providing contours to the film's nebulous aesthetic even as it straddles the line between reality and fairy tale. **CHRISTINE ZIEMBA** 7.0

DADDY LONGLEGS

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 30

DIRECTORS: Ben Safdie, Joshua Safdie
STARRING: Ron Bronstein, Frey and Sage Ranaldo
CINEMATOGRAPHERS: Brett Jutkiewicz, Joshua Safdie
STUDIO/RUN TIME: TK, 100 min.

Unconventional parenting

Is Lenny Sokol the coolest dad ever? Or is he a walking hazard who exposes his often unruly twin boys to risks most parents would consider unthinkable, if not prosecutable? Both, actually. This autobiographical film by brothers Ben and Joshua Safdie (*The Pleasure of Being Robbed*) is a freewheeling, totally bugged-out portrait of a father whose love is inseparable from chaos. Indie director Ron Bronstein (*Frownland*) is an existential dervish as Lenny, a divorced projectionist who only has custody of his boys (Sonic Youth offspring Sage and Frey Ranaldo, in their full seven-year-old glory) for two weeks a year. Emotionally generous and refreshingly real in its restless, handheld whirl, the film veers between tenderness and panic, capturing gritty details of a New York City that barely seems to exist anymore. The wiry Bronstein's caffeinated pulse gives the film its improvisatory edge, as the story takes unpredictable leaps through the magic and terror of childhood. **STEVE DOLLAR** 9.0

Babies photo courtesy of Focus Features

BEST WORST MOVIE

RELEASE DATE: MAY 4 (NEW YORK CITY)

DIRECTOR: Michael Paul Stephenson
STARRING: Stephenson, George Hardy, Claudio Fragrasso, Darren Ewing
CINEMATOGRAPHERS: Katie Graham, Carl Indriago
STUDIO/RUN TIME: AREA23A, 91 min.

A bad thing gets better

The 1990 horror flick *Troll 2* features listless acting, klutzy special effects and not a single troll. It stars a whiny 10-year-old named Michael Paul Stephenson—who, two decades after the movie's release and titanic flop, is still grappling with that disastrous first brush with stardom. Only a few years ago did Stephenson—by then an aspiring filmmaker—realize how oddly popular the movie had become, winning the strange hearts of B-movie aficionados worldwide. They'd thrown costume parties, hosted public screenings, even dubbed it the "best worst movie of all time." This unlikely cult following is part of what Stephenson chronicles in his directorial debut, a kind of laughing-with approach to reconciling *Troll 2*'s disastrous beginnings and unlikely cult following. He also tracks down a number of his co-stars to gauge their enduring relationship to the film; obscurity, thwarted ego and general mental illness plague some, but George Hardy—the actor turned small-town dentist who played Stephenson's father in *Troll 2*—becomes the documentary's de facto star with his guileless, picket-fence grin. It's a tale of despair, redemption and transcendence—like all the best movies, and all the worst. **RACHAEL MADDUX** **7.3**

LEAVES OF GRASS

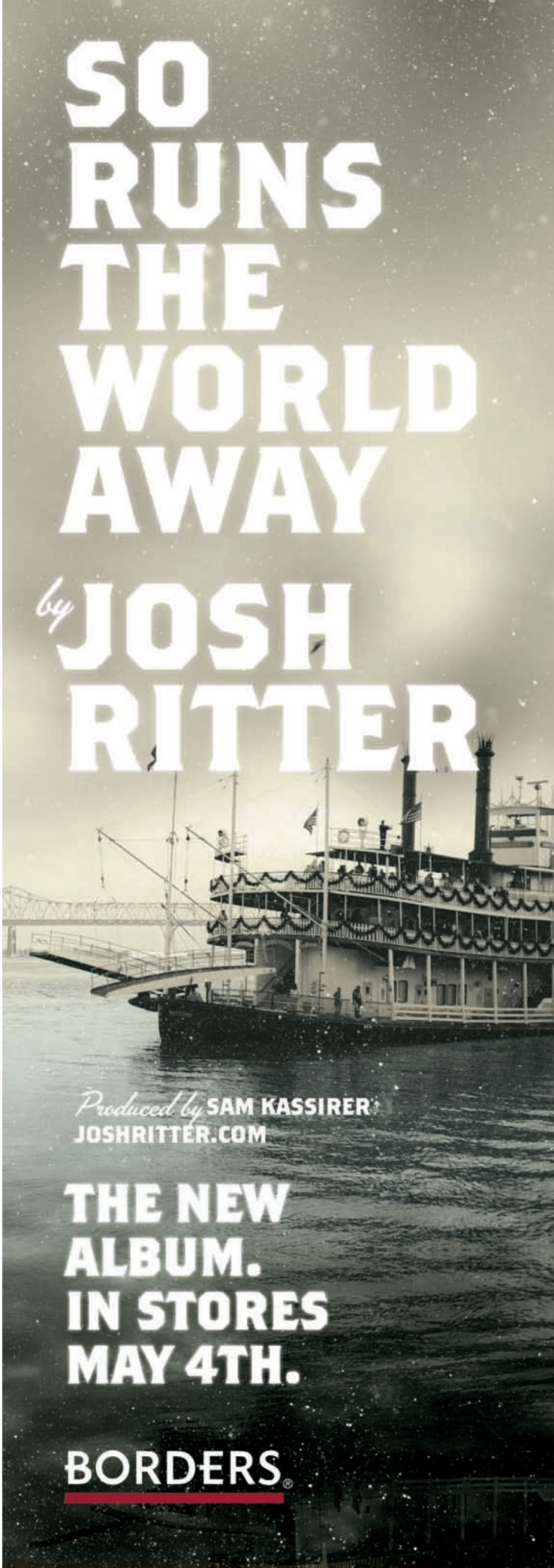
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

DIRECTOR/WRITER: Tim Blake Nelson
STARRING: Edward Norton, Keri Russell, Susan Sarandon
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Roberto Schaefer
STUDIO/RUN TIME: FirstLook Studios, 104 min.

Walt Whitman meets Roger Corman

Few movies pull a bait-and-switch so obnoxiously as *Leaves of Grass*. Things begin smoothly enough, with Edward Norton waxing intellectual as an East-coast Classics professor forced to confront his Oklahoma country mouse past when his pot-dealing twin (also played by Norton) fakes his death. If you think you're lined up for a reflective debate between WASPy elitism and dirt-road integrity, think again: Not since Patrick Swayze yanked out a man's trachea in *Road House* has such southern-fried camp been unleashed on the big screen. The plot flies off the hinges as writer/director Tim Blake Nelson tries to channel the same Mason-Dixon whimsy that permeated the Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (in which he also starred). But combining poetry recitals and crossbow fights isn't clever—it's bipolar. Norton injects some levity as a yokel enamored with blacklight posters and drugs, but he'll need to stop bogarting them if anyone else wants to have a good time. **SEAN EDGAR** **4.9**

Leaves of Grass photo courtesy of FirstLook Studios



A BEAUTIFUL MESS

Costa's dark and dizzying world

BY STEVE DOLLAR

LETTERS FROM FONTAINHAS: THREE FILMS BY PEDRO COSTA

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

DIRECTOR: Pedro Costa
STARRING: Vanda Duarte, Lena Duarte, Zita Duarte, Pedro Laban, António Moreno
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Costa, Emmanuel Machuel
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Criterion, 429 min.

More than anything, Pedro Costa's films are beautiful. Not postcard-pretty or rapturously afire, but composed in ways that make the incidental feel revelatory. Shot in rudimentary conditions over long periods of time, often shrouded in darkness and framed as stationary tableaux, the imagery evokes the Old Masters and lingers in your memory. His films rethink narrative as a kind of osmosis—mysteriously gathering substance out of glances and reveries, yet grounded in the harsh realities of the marginalized lower class.

The works that make up the Portuguese director's Fontainhas Trilogy—*Ossos* (1997), *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and *Colossal Youth* (2006)—could be social experiments. They take root in the outskirts of Lisbon, in the slums of Fontainhas, populated by Cape Verdean immigrants whose bombed-out urban shantytown is slowly being demolished. That the inhabitants of this penumbral limbo are junkies, prostitutes, day laborers, petty criminals and infants could make for some kind of raw, handheld documentary or romanticized meta-fiction about the lower depths of society. But Costa knows how boring that would be. Critics have been tempted to make comparisons with everyone from Andy Warhol to Robert Bresson, but no one has seen films quite like these before.

Series opener *Ossos* (1997) is the shortest and the most conventionally structured. It involves a compassionate nurse (Isabel Ruth, Portugal's answer to Meryl Streep), the young junkie father (Nuno Vaz) she takes in as an adoptive son, a suicidal mother and a baby that survives her various attempts to kill or abandon it. More ostensibly dramatic than its successors, the film unfolds in a series of elliptical observations that have a documentarian realism, even though the non-professional cast worked from a script.

With the series' next two films, Costa proves himself more punk-rock than Lars von Trier and tosses away almost everything but his digital camera. (Viewers curious about the process can check out a generous disc of special features included in this four-DVD box set.) Edited down from years of shooting, *In Vanda's Room* (2000) and *Colossal Youth* (2006) focus on specific characters playing versions of themselves. Take Vanda (Vanda Duarte), a heroin addict whose daily rituals provide a kind of social order amidst the chaos of the Fontainhas slums. The walls are literally tumbling down around Costa's subjects, who nonetheless go about domestic matters in their dilapidated quarters. The camera takes on an ambient consciousness—sometimes, individuals are barely more than an outline in the darkness; sometimes a shaft of sunlight illuminates a table of artifacts in a painterly manner. But even at its most minimalistic, the film constantly arcs back to Vanda, and the pervasive chatter that crackles through the plaster walls around her.

Colossal Youth (an inspired title that has no relationship to the Young Marble Giants album) picks up a few years later, after the Fontainhas slums have been demolished and its denizens set up in a new, antiseptic high-rise housing project. Vanda abides, as conversational as before, but Costa's camera now focuses on another character. Ventura is a tall, elegant, retired Cape Verdean laborer with a haunted gaze. He walks through Lisbon and the project's blank white apartments, a paternal figure checking on old friends from Fontainhas, carrying a letter to the wife who left him years before. The spellbinding words, recited by Ventura, are borrowed from the French surrealist poet Robert Desnos (who died of typhus shortly after being liberated from a Czech concentration camp in 1945). This evokes an enigmatic tone, aided by Ventura's wounded gravitas and the way his striking form finds an iconic posture against stark backdrops serrated by shadows.

> Critics have been tempted to make comparisons with everyone from Andy Warhol to Robert Bresson, but no one has seen films quite like these before.

Every mouth is a book in this spiritual diaspora. Where the story begins or ends is unclear, but the telling is clearly an act of survival.

9.0

STEVE DOLLAR IS A GULF-COAST NATIVE WHOSE CURRENT OBSESSIONS INCLUDE THE ACTRESS AND SINGER CHARLOTTE GAINSBOURG AND PICKLED PIG KNUCKLES. EMBRACE HIM ONLINE AT WWW.24XPS.COM.

Photo courtesy of Criterion

BIGGER THAN LIFE

RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

DIRECTOR: Nicholas Ray
WRITERS: Cyril Hume, Richard Maibaum
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Joe MacDonald
STARRING: James Mason, Barbara Rush
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Criterion Collection, 95 min.

Life-sized and all too prescient

It's little wonder that Nicholas Ray—Hollywood's most trenchant observer of 1950s American society, who splashed caustic critiques across the silver screen—was almost blacklisted. What could parry the unanswerable questions raised by films like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Bitter Victory* better than silencing the man doing the asking? *Bigger Than Life*, like those two other films, deals with a barely sustained middle-class family. It stars the eloquent James Mason as an ailing teacher and father "cured" by an experimental drug, with side effects leading him to pierce the veneer of polite society and lash out at those around him, growing ever more monstrous with a pair of scissors and a Bible in his hands. Ray's film feels less like a mid-century relic and more like a too-late Cassandra call to our present pharmaceutically-doped and financially paralyzed state. Scathing, brusque and at times heavy-handed, *Bigger Than Life* is still a bitter pill to swallow. **7.3**

ANDY BETA

VIVRE SA VIE

RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

DIRECTOR: Jean-Luc Godard
WRITERS: Marcel Sacotte, Godard
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Raoul Coutard
STARRING: Anna Karina, Sady Rebbot
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Criterion Collection, 83 min.

Early outing from New Wave auteur reveals great depths

"I... is someone else," confesses Nana (Anna Karina) during a police inquiry, echoing the century-old sentiment of French poet Arthur Rimbaud. In the next scene, she transforms from a meek record store clerk with suffocating debt and a child that she (and the audience) never sees, to a prostitute with a new set of problems. The 1961 film is classic Godard in its exploration of the economics of pleasure, a topic he'd investigate again in 1967's more agitprop *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*. After *A Woman is a Woman*, his previous kaleidoscopic musical with Karina, this is a more downbeat flick: moody, sparse, noir-ish. The camera feels withdrawn, relying on back-of-the-head shots and mirrored surfaces to capture Nana's conflicted state. With his insouciant and jarring pop-and-pinball films still to come, this resonant picture remains a singular entry in Godard's oeuvre. **8.3**

ANDY BETA

DUSTY SPRINGFIELD: ONCE UPON A TIME 1964-1969

RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

DIRECTOR: David Peck
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Reelin' in the Years, 84 min.

Soul survivor

Born in the U.K. and baptized in Memphis as the queen of blue-eyed soul, chanteuse Dusty Springfield left an indelible mark on pop music in the mid-20th century. With her ascent, the ex cathedra roster of legitimate solo musicians was suddenly coed, and Springfield coolly one-upped the old boys' club with her charming stage presence and booming, brassy alto. *Once Upon a Time*, one of the first releases in a planned "British Invasion" series, serves as a workmanlike overview of Springfield's career. This collection spans 20 live songs (including the legendary '68 performance of "Son of a Preacher Man" on *the Ed Sullivan Show*), and a trove of interviews and other archival footage. Despite slick editing, the presentation suffers from the grainy and faded quality of the source material, but even these ostensible flaws have their own vintage charms. And most tellingly, those four decades' worth of pops and hisses haven't softened Springfield's stentorian, force-of-will vocals one bit. **8.2**

MICHAEL SABA

RIDE WITH THE DEVIL

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 27

DIRECTOR: Ang Lee
WRITERS: James Schamus (screenplay), Daniel Woodrell (novel)
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Frederick Elmes
STARRING: Tobey Maguire, Skeet Ulrich, Jeffrey Wright
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Criterion, 148 min.

Re-cut Ang Lee Civil War epic still suffers blood loss

In a video interview—part of bonus footage accompanying the Criterion director's cut of Ang Lee's epic *Ride With the Devil*—supporting actor Jeffrey Wright surmises that this forgotten picture is "the last film about the Civil War of the 20th century; that arc from *Birth of a Nation* to *Ride* is an evolution in our ways of portraying this critical defining point in our history." While the all-star ensemble cast (also featuring Jim Caviezel, Jonathan Rhys Meyers, Simon Baker and Jewel) follows a curious footnote to the Civil War—guerilla armies and slaves fighting alongside the Confederacy in Kansas and Missouri—no one can do much with the tedious script and poor pacing. Wright is phenomenal as a slave emancipating himself and finding his voice, but Maguire's freshly shaved protagonist is simply overpowered, unable to strike a balance between awkward boy and assured hero. **6.1**

ANDY BETA

DOGORA: OUVRONS LES YEUX (LET US OPEN THE EYES)

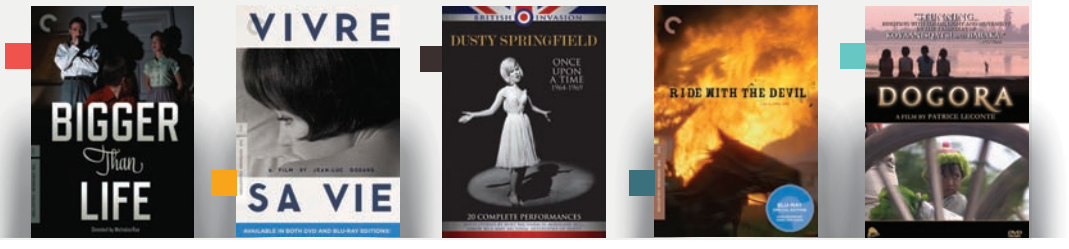
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 27

DIRECTOR: Patrice Leconte
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Jean-Marie Dreujou
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Severin Films, 80 min.

Cambodia from the eyes of a tourist

Most documentary narrators act like khaki-clad tour guides, measuring their self-importance by the number of factoids they can send in one ear and out the other. *Dogora* is a documentary that features no narrator or dialogue; instead, filmmaker Patrice Leconte cues Etienne Perruchon's compositions (one of which is the documentary's namesake) to add a sense of grandeur to Cambodians' day-to-day lives. With wide-eyed fascination, Leconte's camera peers over a group of kids sleeping under an outdoor roof and scrutinizes hundreds of factory workers assembling jeans. But there's a better reason to let this filmmaker be your guide—his fearlessness. When he's not basking in the sights, he's sauntering through a floating village and speeding up alongside motorbike traffic. Instead of a simple history lesson, Leconte presents a fascinating depiction of Cambodia's ever-changing present. **7.5**

CHRISTINA LEE



HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL

Roger Corman's classic rocks on

BY JEFF VRABEL

ROCK 'N' ROLL HIGH SCHOOL: 30TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL EDITION

RELEASE DATE: MAY 4

DIRECTOR: Allan Arkush
WRITERS: Richard Whitley, Russ Dvonch, Joseph McBride
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Dean Cundey
STARRING: P.J. Soles, Vincent Van Patten, Clint Howard
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Shout! Factory, 84 min.

Producer Roger Corman's *Rock 'N' Roll High School* is a teenage lobotomy. It's an overcaffeinated parable about punk rebellion and the seething drive to maintain one's countercultural ethos against a long-ingrained totalitarianism that, in 2010, appears approximately as dangerous as a pre-sectionals pep rally. You get where Corman, the B-movie emperor, is going with the whole punk-inflames-the-youth thing somewhere around the 12-second mark, but why bother suppressing such gleeful silliness, especially when it assumes a world where the Ramones are national heroes?

Originally conceived by director Allan Arkush as "Disco High" with considerably fewer Ramones, the movie is a relic. In our post-*High School Musical* age, it's oddly nostalgic to remember an era when the jocks and music fans were kept in separate camps—but it's shot through with fantastic zingers ("Do your parents *know* you're Ramones?") and well-aged running gags, not the least of which is the setting of Vince Lombardi High School.

The story, which required three screenwriters, is basically a punkish version of every high-school movie ever made. The protagonist isn't a photogenic mop-topped basketball captain, it's the phenomenally un-photogenic mop-topped Joey Ramone. Proto-riot grrl Riff Randell (the effervescent P.J. Soles) and her friend Kate (Dey Young) battle fascist Tim Curry-lookalike Principal Togar (Mary Woronov) to bring The Spirit Of Youth™ to a school located at 100 Main Street, U.S.A. They enlist the help and comic relief of an aggressively predictable roster of supporting characters: the sexless preppie quarterback, the latent-hippie music teacher, the two power-drunk hall monitors who both kind of look like Jonah Hill and, of course, Clint Howard as the wheeling-and-dealing student mastermind controlling the school's scholastic, social and sexual matrix. (Of the quarterback, he proudly announces: "I've known Tom since his freshman year, when I sold him his first touchdown.")

> Why bother suppressing such gleeful silliness, especially when it assumes a world where the Ramones are national heroes?

Riff longs to give the Ramones a song she wrote for them, which she does, which they play, which everybody likes, at which point you start to wonder if this high school or Disney's is more forehead-slappingly wish-fulfilling. For their part, the Ramones are appropriately gawky and haven't the foggiest idea what to do when the camera's on them, except lip-sync through hallways and palpably long for the concert scenes. There's a great moment backstage, when, after their climactic show, Riff finally presents them with her opus (titled, natch, "Rock 'N' Roll High School") while the guys indulge in a cathartic post-show orgy of, um, ravenous pizza consumption.

This 30th-anniversary remaster comes with new widescreen transfers, scores of interviews with Corman and Arkush and a load of audio commentary, including one with Young, who proudly went on to star as "Waitress" in *Spaceballs*. (It also features a flip-side of Corman's 1984 flick *Suburbia*.) "This high school is a failure!" principal Togar shouts during the school's eventual climactic explosion. Maybe so, but 30 years later, it still rocks.

7.0

Photo courtesy of Shout! Factory

THE YES MEN FIX THE WORLD

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

WRITERS/DIRECTORS: Andy Bichlbaum, Mike Bonanno, Kurt Engfehr
CINEMATOGRAPHERS: Raul Barcelona, Sarah Price
STARRING: Bichlbaum, Bonanno
STUDIO/RUN TIME: New Video Group, 87 min.

An idealist's view of a cynic's world

Political pranksters Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno spend the first hour-plus of their latest documentary traveling the world and making outrageous claims and promises while posing as representatives for everyone from Halliburton to Dow Chemical. Their mission is simple: If we loosened our grip on Milton Friedman's doctrine of greed-as-virtue, we could make life better for millions of people. It's a vital, optimistic message, but Bichlbaum's pranks aren't particularly fun to watch—he cringes when (masquerading as a HUD representative) he's introduced at a conference by New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin with a story about a "well-dressed lie being chased by naked truth." As their final, most successful prank (distributing fake *New York Times* declaring the end of the Iraq War) shows, the Yes Men are idealists who forever walk the line between disillusionment and sentimentalism. Their film is too uneven to be great cinema, or even great agitprop, but it does make the viewer want to do her own part to fix the world. **RACHEL BAILEY** 6.4

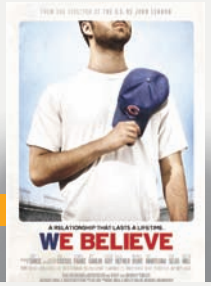
WE BELIEVE: A RELATIONSHIP THAT LASTS A LIFETIME

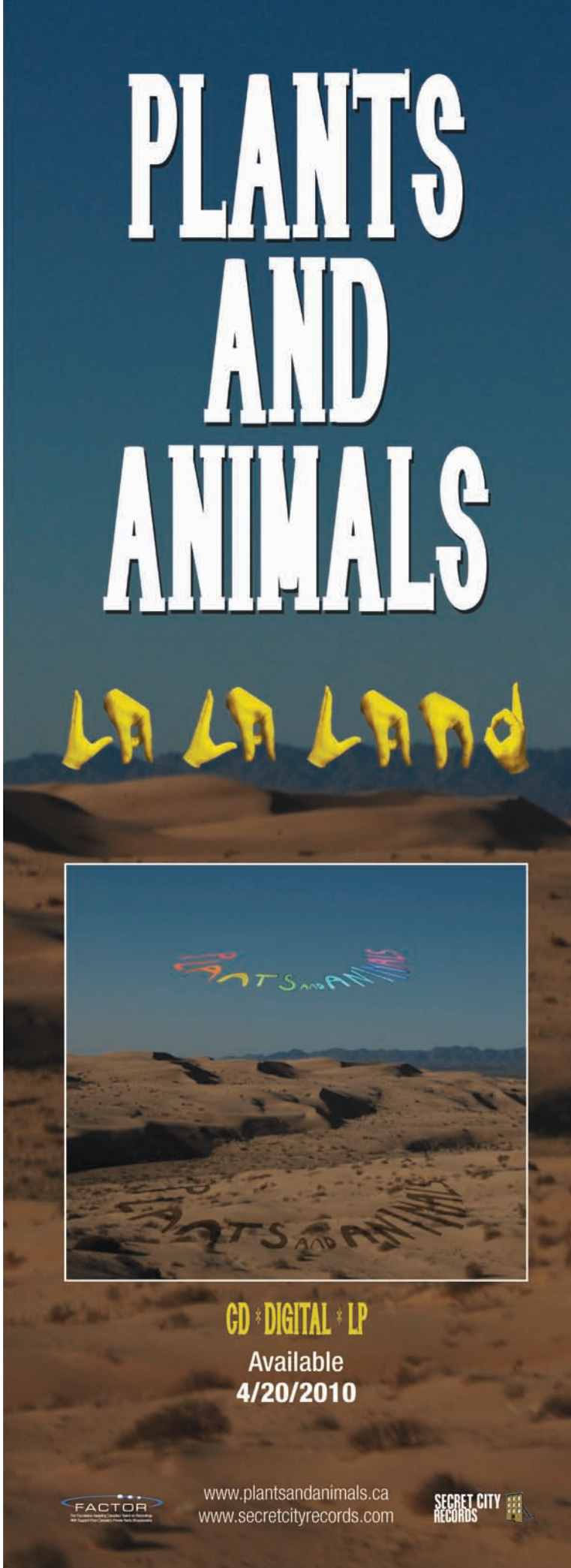
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

WRITER/DIRECTOR: John Scheinfeld
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Richard C. Christian, Jr.
STARRING: Gary Sinise, Dennis Franz
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Virgil Films, 104. min.

Cubbies doc slaps a single

We Believe is a deeply affectionate history of the Chicago Cubs—those perennial underdogs of Major League Baseball—and their way-past-committed hometown fanbase. Vintage footage blended with game vignettes highlight the communal, generational and matrimonial bonds of Cub supporters, including celebrity fans weighing in as apparent experts. The narrative arc revisits the Cubs' 2008 season—the 100-year anniversary of the team's last World Series triumph—and underscores the great expectations and deflating disappointments that mark Cubs fandom. But this "officially authorized" documentary takes a sour turn when it veers into public-relations profiles of the most recent Cubs bullpen. The film trends toward overt sentimentality (Bonnie Hunt describes Chicago as a "giant Mayberry") and neglects more divisive topics such as tarnished legend Sammy Sosa or the tragic ostracism of Steve Bartman. Still, *We Believe* succeeds as a visual history of Chicago's meteoric rise, and the seemingly cursed ballclub's decline. Its simple, stirring images of Wrigley Field remind us why, for untold numbers of fans, hope renews each spring. **PATRICK CONNELLY** 6.3





BARBARISM & MOONSHINE

Not sleeping with the enemy

BY DAVID LANGNESS

SEBASTIAN JUNGER

WAR

[NONFICTION] TWELVE
RELEASE DATE: MAY 11

When I came back from the war in Vietnam I was 21 years old. In my platoon near the DMZ they called me the old man, but back in the U.S.A. I was just a not-very-introspective or self-aware kid, struggling to make sense of what I'd been through.

For the next few years, I had the classic symptoms of what used to be called "shell shock" or "battle fatigue"—a heightened startle reflex, graphic nightmares, dread paranoia, sudden sweats, hyper-vigilance—which is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. Slowly, as I fit myself back into university life and the anti-war movement, the PTSD abated and something else took its place—an intense need to understand the effects of war on the human soul, my own included.

So I began to read, haunting bookstores and libraries to find the accounts of the men and women who had gone to war too. I collected and carefully immersed myself in more than 400 Vietnam War novels and memoirs. I made a quest of it, interviewing authors, going to academic conferences on the war, dedicating probably 20 years of my life trying to comprehend what I and many others had experienced. Books like Michael

Herr's *Dispatches* or Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* became my touchstones, because they combined exacting observation with high art and imagination, offering me ways to see inside and understand. Looking back, I realize that this powerful desire to know was my therapy, my way of coming to terms—from an adult perspective—with what I witnessed in my youth.

Sebastian Junger's new book *WAR*, like most combat memoirs, attempts to short-circuit that process. In five trips to eastern Afghanistan's combat-intensive Korengal Valley for *Vanity Fair*, Junger covered 15 months in the life of one platoon of Americans: 30 young men living and dying through their generation's violent rite of passage. Fighting the Taliban and the jihadist foreign soldiers, the platoon from Battle Company went through what all combat soldiers do—they strip life down to its survival-based core, trying to kill the other guy before he kills them.

Unfortunately, the conclusions Junger draws from his courageous sojourn in Afghanistan don't cut new literary trail. In the book's three sections—Fear, Killing and Love—he reports that combat is an incredible adrenalin rush ("war is life multiplied by some number that no one has ever heard of"); that combat bonds men together like nothing else ("The defense of the tribe is an insanely compelling idea, and once you've been exposed to it, there's almost nothing else you'd rather do."); and finally, that war ruins soldiers' civilian life ("... he's crawling out of his skin because there hasn't been a good firefight in a week. How do you bring a guy like that back into the world?").

Junger spends most of *WAR* glorifying camaraderie, describing in detail entire battles or the massive killing power of American weaponry, and citing studies on fear and courage to bolster his sympathetic views of the grunts he profiles.

> All great war books are also anti-war books, but this one misses that mark.

His *Perfect Storm*, tough-guys-in-extremis style works well as straight reportage, but it pales in comparison to the truly transcendent insights of *Dispatches* or the deep, harrowing lessons of *The Things They Carried*. All great war books are also anti-war books, but this one misses that mark.

Here's the problem: Journalistic detachment, and the profound, objective insights it can potentially produce, is a recent casualty of the military's PR policy of "embedding" journalists. "I was an 'embedded' reporter," Junger writes, "and entirely dependent on the U.S. military for food, shelter, security and transportation."

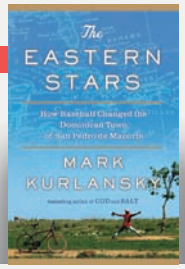
The military has this one figured out: By placing journalists with the troops, and making them entirely reliant on those troops for everything (their lives included), the resulting coverage is bound to be essentially sympathetic.

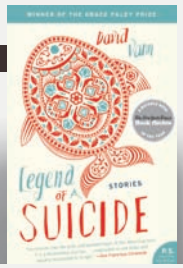
That subjective, sure-fire sympathy produces accounts like this one—essentially one-sided, one-dimensional storytelling that presents and reinforces the perspective of one military, one nation. The best journalists who have covered the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have understood this not-so-subtle military propaganda tool, and have refused to be embedded as a result. If Junger had followed their example—or embedded himself with the Taliban, too—then we'd have a story.

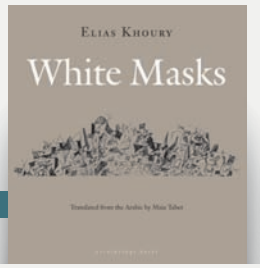
5.4

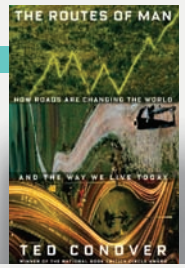
Photo by Summer Davis

➥ DAVID LANGNESS IS A WRITER, COMBAT VETERAN AND ANTIWAR ACTIVIST WHO LIVES IN TOPANGA, CALIFORNIA.









MARK KURLANSKY

The Eastern Stars: How Baseball Changed the Dominican Town of San Pedro de Macorís

[NON-FICTION]

RIVERHEAD BOOKS
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

Béisbol? ¡Sí!

The Dominican sugar mill town of San Pedro de Macorís is among the world's epicenters of baseball talent. Once a fishing village, sugar—and then baseball—transformed it into a regional economic hub, though few townspeople are actually wealthy. Desperation drives each generation to the town's one true money-maker: signing bonuses for teen-aged baseball players. And every boy plays, because "it could be the salvation of an entire family," Mark Kurlansky writes.

Kurlansky's rich geographic and cultural portrait is far more than a baseball book. He tells the a full story of San Pedro and the Dominican Republic in the 120 years since Cubans brought them baseball, and then he goes back further, relating the Dominican Republic's sad history, from Columbus's genocidal microbes to the murderous Trujillo dictatorship. *The Eastern Stars* shows how one of Latin America's poorest countries has derived much of its modern identity from a sport borrowed from America's greener pastures. **ALEXANDER F. REMINGTON** **8.5**

STEVE ALMOND

Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life

[NON-FICTION]

RANDOM HOUSE
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

The virtue of fanaticism

In his new memoir, Steve Almond—author of *Candyfreak* and self-proclaimed "DF" (Drooling Fanatic)—gives a humorous, heartfelt look at what life is like for those of us hopelessly enraptured with rock 'n' roll.

Not a new story, but he tells it well. As a young writer plagued by self-doubt, Almond reveled in the emotional escape of music; the joy of his fanaticism is conveyed poignantly—and so completely—that we're infected with his touted salvation too.

With well-placed "interludes" or "reluctant exegeses," Almond peppers his pages with biting insights and funny vignettes; dismissing, for instance, Toto's "Africa" as "...the lovechild of Muzak and Imperialism."

Though the language feels a bit highbrow, Almond ultimately crafts a playful and intelligent read. There's a sense of real joy and humanity here that will resonate with other DFs, or anyone who loves one. **MICHELLE BIRD** **8.0**

DAVID VANN

Legend of a Suicide

[FICTION]

HARPER PERENNIAL
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

Survival stories

David Vann's debut short story collection explores the painful honesty betweem fathers and sons, always asking the age-old "why?" Set predominantly in Alaska, the collection's five stories and one novella chart the course of Roy and his father Jim into literal wilderness. The novella "Sukkwan Island," reveals Roy at age 13 overhearing his father's nightly crying jags and confessions: "I got crabs from one of these prostitutes, and I passed them on..." We suffer with the two characters through frostbite, hunger and, yes, suicide attempts.

Vann offers work that is part memoir and part fiction, and mercifully free of self-indulgence. As the best writers do, he transcends his own painful personal experiences, and tells us of ourselves. **ASHLEY KAINE** **8.5**

Mark Kurlansky photo by Sylvia Plachy

ELIAS KHOURY (TRANSLATED BY MAIA TABET)

White Masks

[FICTION]

ARCHIPELAGO BOOKS
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

Who killed Lebanon?

Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury is renowned for his epic *Gate of the Sun*, the definitive literary treatment of the ongoing Palestinian conflict. Now he gives us Khalil Ahmad Jaber, a bereaved father whose grief following the death of his son led him to obsessively whitewash the walls of his neighborhood, and who eventually turns up dead, his body mutilated. The narrator, a journalist, never knew Jaber, but decides to investigate. The result is a multifaceted portrait of societal disintegration through a patchwork of sometimes meandering, sometimes riveting, tales of disparate individuals associated with the deceased. It's a kaleidoscope of grotesque images, from rape and extrajudicial executions to decomposing bodies amid heaps of trash. **RAYYAN AL-SHAWAF** **7.5**

TED CONOVER

The Routes of Man: How Roads Are Changing The World

[NON-FICTION]

KNOPF
RELEASE DATE:
AVAILABLE NOW

"Walls are bad, roads are freedom"

Ted Conover is a rambling man. Previous books found him hopping trains and crossing the border with illegal immigrants; even in *New Jack*, his award-winning account of guarding the notorious Sing Sing prison, the road makes an appearance as a symbol of freedom.

Here, Conover shows us roads' double-edge. If they all once led to Rome, they also brought barbarian hordes to the very center of its power. Roads connect traditional cultures to the modern world but also pave the way for those civilizations' destruction, as we learn of the proposed interoceanic highway in Peru in the chapter "From Park Avenue to the Forest Primeval."

With Conover, we travel a route in the Himalayas down a frozen river, on roads that chart the stars and on a highway that facilitates the spread of AIDS. Through him, we begin to see roads traversing not only space, but time. **MONTANA WOJCZUK** **8.0**

KISSING SOME ARS POETICA

BY ROSE GORMAN

Critic Stephen Burt, in a 2007 Poetry Foundation roundtable on poetry as a social function, noted that writing poems takes place more often than a great number of other human activities.

One reason, no doubt, is that it's a fascinating, liberating genre: Writers are held accountable not for what they *mean*, necessarily, but for what they say and *how* they say it.

When it comes to the poems we're able to recall from memory, what makes the words stick? Perhaps it's intimacy, the genre's ability to revel in tiny, but deeply felt, moments of grief and joy. A few words can memorialize the grandest scheme of our lives—our relationships to each other, to nature, to our nation and ourselves.

Reflection comes full force with National Poetry Month in April, stamped onto our calendars in 1996 by the Academy of American Poets. While there's sure to be an abundance of sappy ballads and groaning daddy verse in various tributes to the form, these four new collections are worth a look.

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE

Swag

PENMANSHIP BOOKS

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

The comforts of home

Swag finds its home in its author's kitchen, in the gurgling 'O' of her bathroom sink drain and in a bevy of strong, familial women. In "Betty Sez," a poem in two parts, Browne invites us to kneel with her at the foot of a grandaunt for a dose of sage advice and a lesson in self-defense: "Her glare promised a gunbutt'n for any / man that touched her expensive handbag ... At the age of 90, she didn't hesitate to swing / Cutting the wind in half with her sinewy arms." It turns out staying home wasn't such a bad idea. **9.2**

AARON KUNIN

Sore Throat and Other Poems

FENCE BOOKS

RELEASE DATE: MAY 15

Spoken words

Aaron Kunin, author of the novel *The Mandarin*, straddles that literary fence of poet/fiction-writer (or fiction-writer/poet, depending on your view). A master of both lyrical balance and fine, angst-ridden storytelling, he serves up this collection with a defiant bent that shines through a great deal of raw self-awareness. In the collection, Kunin explains that he's been "compulsively transcribing everything I say, hear, read or think" over the past few years, which may explain why his personal vocabulary plays out so well on the page and when read aloud. In mapping out his take on Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," his awareness of his own linguistic tics proves especially handy. **8.0**

IAN WILLIAMS

You Know Who You Are

WOLSAK AND WYNN

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

It's the little things

Williams sneaks his poetry debut into the mainstream, shrouded in a thick cloak of pop culture references and visual noise. His title piece, "You Know Who You Are," recounts late-night *Law & Order* reruns with manic stream-of-consciousness. With the threat of the Terminator's laser-red eye in "Notwithstanding" and the intricate science of ramen noodle preparation in "Open," he keep readers engaged in his dialogue on young black masculinity. **8.5**

JOSIE SIGLER

Living Must Bury

FENCE BOOKS

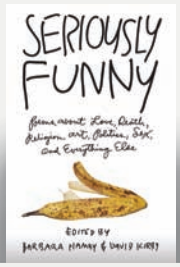
RELEASE DATE: MAY 15

Her loss, our gain

Sigler is the recipient of Fence Books's 2010 Motherwell Prize, awarded to a first or second collection of poems written in English by a woman. This new collection is a book of mourning and meditations on loss. To set the stage for these complicated emotions, Sigler looks to relationships with family and neighbors. Her words carry the weight of events that happen across the globe, like her mother's awakening in 1975 pressed against the invasion of East Timor that same year. For Sigler, life's more full of melancholic endings than new beginnings. **7.0**

➥ ROSE GORMAN IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND BOOK BLOGGER FOR WWW.NEIGHBORBEENYC.COM.

Josie Sigler photo by Tabitha Morgan



BARBARA HAMBY & DAVID KIRBY (ED.)

Seriously Funny: Poems about Love, Death, Religion, Art, Politics, Sex, and Everything Else

[POETRY]

THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

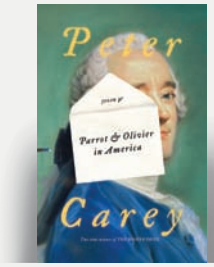
To wit

The "seriously funny" poems in this literate, eccentric collection share absolutely nothing with the bawdy limericks you quoted to sophomoric buddies back when you sucked kegs. Those poems made your friends laugh till they spewed brew out their noses. *These* poems are big-league, serious verse laced with wit—yes, wit. They're often more seriously clever than seriously funny. You'll prefer Sedaris and Pendarvis for belly laughs.

But sample this, from the opening lines of Bill Zavatsky's poem, "Bald."

In the mirror it's plain to see: / soon I'll be bald, like the two faceless men / staring at each other in the word SOON.

Hamby and Kirby, significant poets in their own right, have done important work here. They throw rescue lines to readers who jumped that very serious ship of verse, the HMS T.S. Eliot, way back when. **CHARLES MCNAIR** 7.8



PETER CAREY

Parrot and Olivier in America

[FICTION]

KNOPF
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

A Tocquevillian epic

In his new novel, two-time Man Booker Prize-winner Peter Carey ambitiously attempts to fictionalize the journey of 19th-century French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville to the United States.

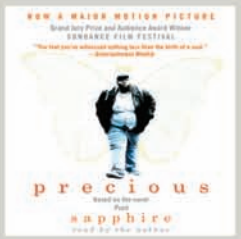
Olivier de Garmont, a French aristocrat modeled after de Tocqueville, and Parrot, his British servant, voyage from Paris to classless, lawless America. As they struggle to redefine their relationship and respective status in the New World, each is somewhat disappointed by the country he finds—Olivier by its lack of refinement, and Parrot by its corruption and greed. Still, both come to appreciate and benefit from the opportunity embodied by the young country.

Carey's carefully crafted and often comic descriptions (New York City is "a smudgy charcoal sort of maze in which the high-haunched New York pigs mingled with New York clerks") are evocative of a bygone America, while his story of a friendship forged between two unlikely characters is the stuff of timeless fiction. **ROSS ARBES** 7.9

Peter Carey photo by Michael Lionstar

PASTE RECOMMENDS @ AUDIBLE.COM

Point Omega
by Don DeLillo
Narrated by Campbell Scott



Precious
by Sapphire
Narrated by Bahni Turpin

The Happiness Project
by Gretchen Rubin
Narrated by Gretchen Rubin

NO IMPACT MAN
THE ADVENTURES OF A GUILTY LIBERAL WHO ATTEMPTS TO SAVE THE PLANET AND DISCOVERS OUR WAY OF LIFE IN THE PROCESS
COLIN BEAVAN

No Impact Man
by Colin Beavan
Narrated by Colin Beavan

Friend of The Family
by Lauren Grodstein
Narrated by Rick Adamson

audible.com

OCEAN BLACK

Welcome to the second coming of Rapture

BY LEIGH ALEXANDER

BIOSHOCK 2

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

DEVELOPERS: 2K MARIN, DIGITAL EXTREMES
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
PLATFORMS: XBOX 360, PLAYSTATION 3, PC

The star of 2007's *BioShock* wasn't its faceless protagonist, whose genuine identity was one of the game's great reveals. Neither was it the power-crazy Objectivist zealot, Andrew Ryan. It was Rapture, the failed utopia beneath the sea, as haunting as it was dreamlike. And it's to Rapture that *BioShock 2* returns, with its rotting architecture, leaking machinery and grand, gorgeous chaos.

The ruined city is as familiar as an old friend, immediately recognizable—although it's startling how the sea is beginning to encroach, leaving Rapture's elegant stairways and noble statues crusted with coral forms and dripping with luminous moss. The city remains merely a stage for the gruesome brawling and mad wailing of its residents, the Splicers, still addicted to genetic mutations and looking far worse for it. There's a new extremist adversary in collectivist cult leader Sofia Lamb, but her smooth-as-butter declarations against the protagonist via radio broadcasts aren't much different than Ryan's were. The game's mechanics are not meaningfully different—you've got an arsenal of familiar Plasmids (think fire, lightning, ice) on the left hand, gun and melee weapon on the right.

In other words, little has changed. *BioShock 2* takes the safe bet that the framework its predecessor established will prove compelling enough to warrant a second visit. And it wisely focuses on Rapture's most fascinating residents—the poignant, frightening symbiotes Big Daddy and Little Sister. The original game was arresting when one of the lamp-eyed and ghoulish little girls who gather life force, or ADAM, from Rapture's dead would pass by, escorted by the threatening silhouette of the hulk protecting her. *BioShock 2*'s twist, revealed early on, is that now *you* are a Big Daddy, and you will carry and protect many Little Sisters in your quest to find one very special one—unless you'd rather "harvest" the girls you find for their ADAM. *BioShock*'s much-discussed "save or kill" choice is still present, but with the player in the role of a Big Daddy—whom we've come to understand is by its very nature a Little Sister defender—that choice loses much of its impact, especially as the primary play mechanic hinges on protecting Little Sisters while they go about their grisly gathering.

There's a new challenge for a Big Daddy in the form of the Big Sisters: larger, faster creatures who exist to protect the little girls. Battles against them are often truly breathtaking, lightning-fast and taxing, demanding all of your material resources and strategic planning. The game's other great experiences will stem from watching a Little Sister and her giant, wicked syringe while she extracts ADAM from corpses. The Splicers come for her in waves—an empty ballroom, a theatre balcony and a ruined swimming pool suddenly becomimg massive battlefields where creative use of traps, security devices and the environment itself is just as important as paternal brawn.

BioShock didn't really need a sequel to begin with, and a wild overhaul could have been a disaster. The developers have wisely focused on different elements of Rapture's story rather than alter too much; there is a thrill that never quite wears off with the realization that that bestial, globe-headed shadow on the wall is you, or when you're hit by an enemy and evince that familiar low, whale-like moan. But the Big Daddy / Little Sister relationship is less mysterious now that the player is actively participating in it, and other Big Daddies—once riveting foes—go down much more easily now that you're the one wielding the giant drill-arm. *BioShock 2* is unable to bring the player closer to its world's most fascinating elements without ruining some of their mystique, but it's nonetheless a worthy tradeoff.

BioShock didn't really need a sequel to begin with, and a wild overhaul could have been a disaster.

With a well-paced, multifaceted story about father and daughter, the game offers more real player choices, and succeeds at provoking thought instead of simply wearing brainy trappings. It's truly impressive that a game casting players as such a powerful character succeeds so often at making them feel helpless or humbled—as in an indelible scene where Rapture's bounds are overcome by rushing water and darkness. The original *BioShock* was a revelation, and the sequel proves that lawless, wild Rapture is more than just an ideal setting for a brilliantly polished action videogame. It's a framework for narrative and philosophical exploration—one we'll hopefully return to in future installments.

9.2

➥ LEIGH ALEXANDER IS NEWS DIRECTOR AT GAMASUTRA, AUTHOR OF THE SEXY VIDEOGAMELAND BLOG AND A WIDELY-PUBLISHED GAMING WRITER.

CHIME

DEVELOPER: ZOË MODE
PUBLISHER: ONEBIGGAME
PLATFORM: XBOX 360
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

Turn the blocks around

It's hard to criticize *Chime*'s good intentions: Publisher OneBigGame donates the majority of the game's profits to charity, and *Chime* itself sings with optimism. The *Lumines*-style puzzler boasts a small soundtrack from upbeat producers such as Orbital, Lemon Jelly and—best of all—Philip Glass. You're free to place squares anywhere on the playing field to form "quads" of at least 3x3 interlocking blocks, thus increasing your coverage of the field. Addiction sets in as you try to expand quads for score multipliers before the moving beat line clears them away. In the oddly haphazard Time mode, you chase points or coverage before the clock runs out; meanwhile, the beat line triggers chimes and samples as it passes your blocks and quads. In Free-Play mode, the structure falls apart as you're left incidentally generating music until your coverage reaches 100%. The game makes it hard for you to do wrong, but it also lacks priorities, leaving you wishing that *Chime* were more focused on goals than good intentions. **RYAN KUO**

6.5

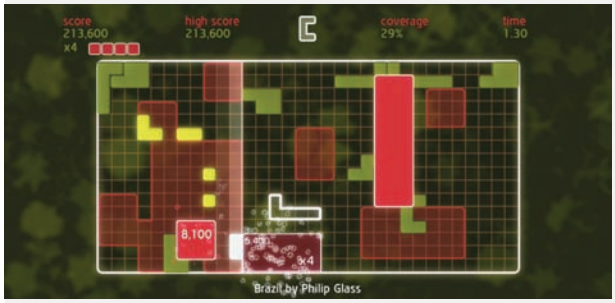
SHIREN THE WANDERER

DEVELOPER: CHUNSOFT
PUBLISHER: ATLUS
PLATFORM: WII
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

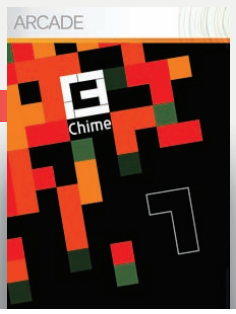
A must for the discerning Wii owner

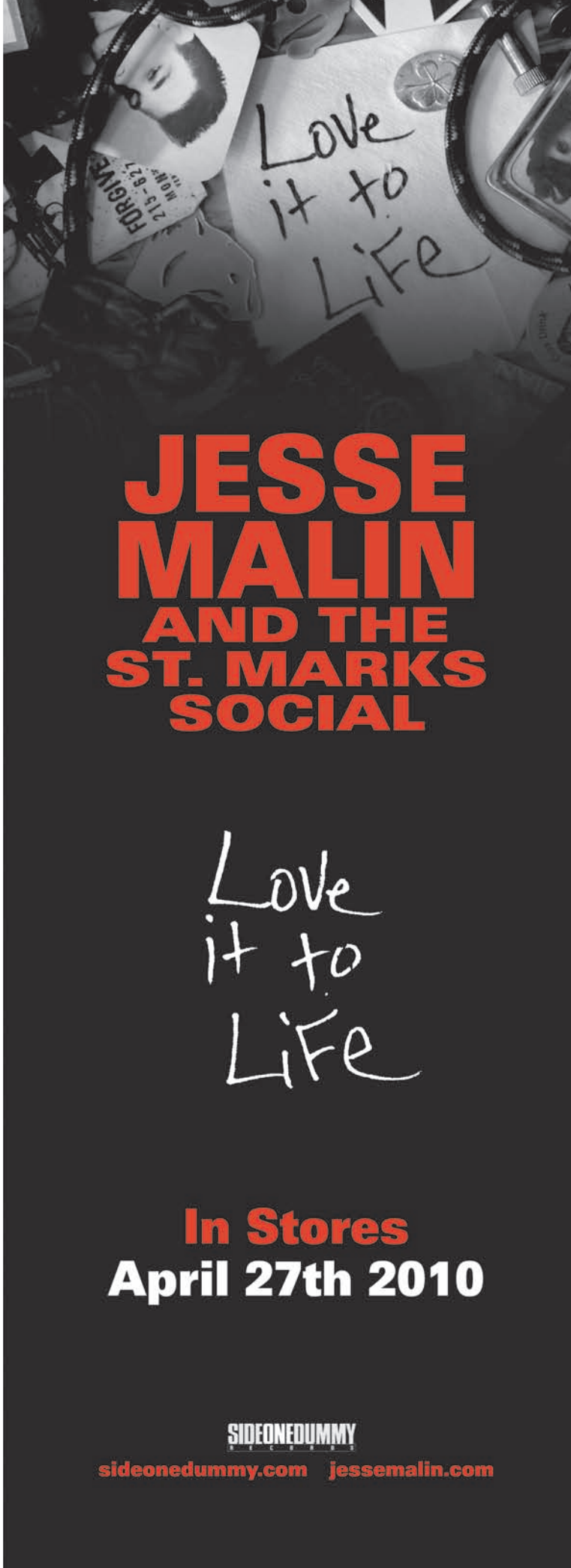
Shiren the Wanderer is the perfect companion piece to last year's role-playing dark horse *Demon's Souls*. Steeped in ancient Japanese mythology and retro gaming mechanics, the game builds a bridge between the old and the new. *Shiren*'s adventure adheres to the rules of the roguelike genre, a species of dungeon crawler evolved from an obscure 1980 PC game. Players make arduous expeditions into increasingly difficult dungeons where resources (like food) are scarce, and death feels only one step away. Played on its hardest setting, *Shiren the Wanderer* answers brazen play with severe punishment—all weapons and money Shiren and company carry are lost upon death. Happily, this edition offers a kinder, gentler setting without such punitive measures. Just don't go *too easy* on yourself. Allow the game to pitch only softballs and you'll never know the immense satisfaction of bouncing back from disheartening disaster. Failure is half the fun. **JASON KILLINGSWORTH**

9.1



➥ *Chime*





NEED MORE SPACE?

Interstellar role-playing shooter weaves an epic sci-fi yarn

BY GARRETT MARTIN

MASS EFFECT 2

RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

DEVELOPER: BIOWARE
PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS
PLATFORMS: XBOX 360, PC

The first *Mass Effect* suffered from an identity crisis: It couldn't decide if it was a role-playing game or a third-person shooter. Even worse, the box-art and promotional materials made you think the main character was some generic buzz-cut space marine. Everyone knows Commander Shepard is a beautiful lady, a tough-but-compassionate bottle redhead with a weakness for liquor and alien women.

Okay, that's only *my* Commander Shepard. Like fingerprints or DNA, everyone had their own version of Shepard. *Mass Effect* gave you total control over the protagonist's appearance and great leeway with her biography. The story and its plethora of branching decisions were designed to create a kinship between you and the character, making you feel like you were conversing with the game and not just going through the preordained motions. That was the best part of an otherwise flawed experience.

The bulk of *Mass Effect 2* involves compiling a squad to take down a race of aliens aiming to destroy the galaxy. You can recruit characters in any order you like, choosing missions from your ship's galaxy map. If you want your crew to be loyal, you have to undertake special missions for each character. These missions work brilliantly; on the surface they're about earning your teammates' trust, and they effectively bond you with your fictional squad. By the end of each mission I cared more about my team than I thought possible, even the members that seemed off-putting at first.

Mass Effect 2 is a more confident and assured sequel. It's better than the original in almost every way, but that shouldn't be a surprise: Despite an engrossing story and a few memorable characters, *Mass Effect* was a technical mess. It had frequent graphical hiccups and struggled to unite RPG conventions with third-person action. It was hard to lose yourself in the game because you were constantly pausing the action to select a special power or make room for new items.

But *Mass Effect 2* is an overhaul, paring back the original's already stripped-down RPG elements. Instead of loot drops, you research upgrades that apply to either your entire party or specific members. Instead of dozens of incremental steps dispersed between several abilities, each point leads to a large boost for one specific skill, proving that massive inventories, rigidly segmented classes and extensive skill trees aren't necessary to inhabit a role, which is the point of an RPG. There's enough character customization and progression to make your Shepard feel unique without getting bogged down in dated and unnecessary gameplay conventions, especially if you import your character from the first game.

Mass Effect 2 is a better piece of interactive fiction largely because it's less interested in plot than character.

The controls might not be as smooth or the maps as well-designed as *Uncharted 2*, but *Mass Effect 2* fixes many of the first game's issues. It's easier to aim and switch in and out of cover. You can also map three different biotic powers to a single button-press instead of one, so you don't have to pull up the game-pausing power select wheel as often.

Most importantly, *Mass Effect 2* is a better piece of interactive fiction, largely because it's less interested in plot than character. That's the biggest narrative change from its predecessor, where the story was king and character interaction wasn't always interesting or necessary. You could save the universe in the first game without ever speaking to your crew; try that in *Mass Effect 2* and nobody will live through the final battle.

But *Mass Effect 2* isn't content to merely put other videogames to shame. It challenges Hollywood itself, with better writing and acting than many recent sci-fi movies. It's almost as good as *Uncharted 2* at merging games and cinema, ending with a final showdown that's a master-class in pacing and tension. And unlike most games or movies, you can immediately restart *Mass Effect 2* and have a very different experience—though I'll keep my Shepard as she is, thanks.

9.5

➥ GARRETT MARTIN IS A FREELANCE WRITER WHOSE WORK HAS APPEARED IN THE *BOSTON HERALD*, BOSTON'S *WEEKLY DIG* AND ATLANTA'S *CREATIVE LOAFING*.

God of War III

MIGHT & MAGIC: CLASH OF HEROES

DEVELOPER: CAPYBARA GAMES
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
PLATFORM: NINTENDO DS
RELEASE DATE: SUMMER 2010

Kids command the darndest puzzle-solving demon armies

Like Capybara's *Critter Crunch*, *Clash of Heroes* twists a simple mechanic into surprising new forms. You roleplay as one of five children whose lives have been upturned by a demon incursion. Each child commands a different army—elf, human, undead, demon and wizard—whose distinct strengths unfold as you align them into units of like color, *Bejeweled*-style. Rows of three warriors form protective walls; columns of three make attack formations. Despite the simple graphics, it takes foresight to outmaneuver your opponent, and the tides can change in the space of a turn. While the fusion of puzzle-solving and role-playing recalls *Puzzle Quest*, a more apt comparison would be *Professor Layton*. These realms and creatures are full of charm and brain-teasing conundrums, and the pixel art is curiously expressive. **CHRIS DAHLEN** **8.0**

GOD OF WAR III

DEVELOPER: SCEA SANTA MONICA STUDIOS
PUBLISHER: SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 3
RELEASE DATE: AVAILABLE NOW

A god-killing romp of Nietzschean proportions

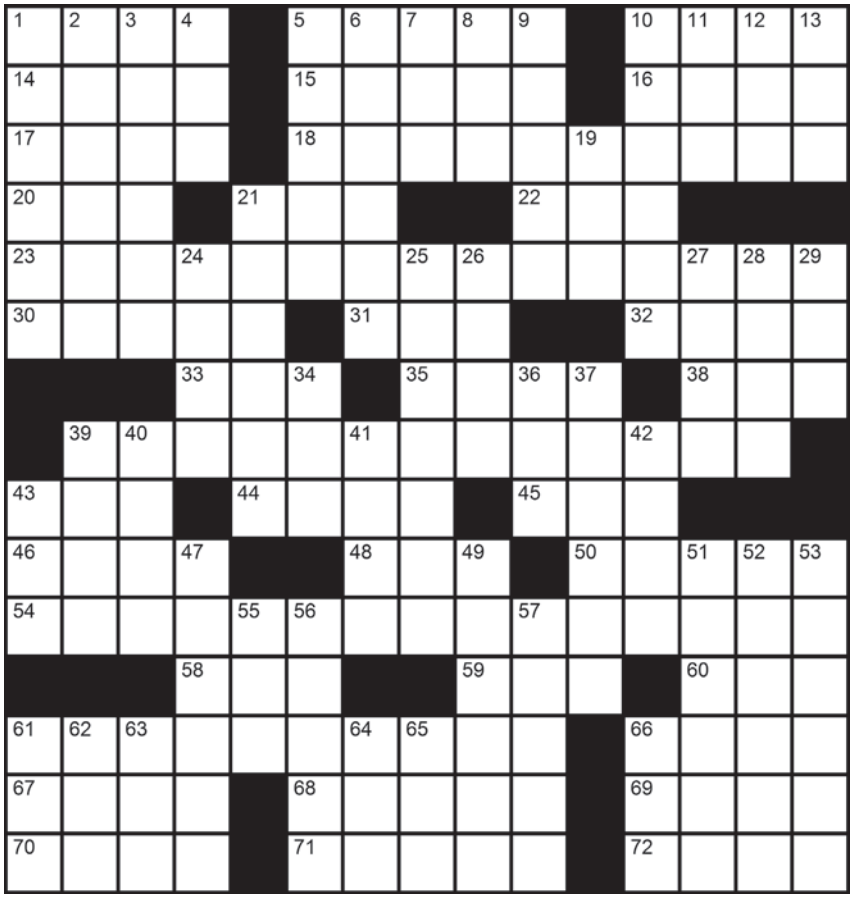
Some play videogames for escapism, to bask in the glow of being large and in charge. Flipping this convention on its head, Sony's ultra-violent riff on Greek mythology, *God of War III*, goes out of its way to make you feel like a mosquito perched atop a dinosaur's shoulders. In the game's most breathtaking sequence, Kratos' quest to exact vengeance on the gods of Mount Olympus finds him scrambling up the crusty skin of Cronos, a Titan banished to the volcanic pits of Tartarus. When the camera pulls back to appreciate the scale of the action, Kratos is reduced to the tiny streaks of his twin blades flailing about. The game delivers a chewy metaphor for how insignificant humans feel against the unknowable vastness of space and time; if we rage against the idea of a god, part of that impulse must stem from our discomfort with resting firmly under its thumb. Kratos himself has a chance to kill his father/creator at the conclusion of his quest, but will that victory reverse the slide into dystopian chaos that his actions have wrought?

While I doubt that Sony's development team at Santa Monica Studios aspired to such theological resonance, the game nonetheless begs for a closer reading. As the third and final title in the series, though, the results are mixed. For the most part, its white-knuckle combat and benchmark-setting visuals are sublime. The experience is nearly flawless, except for the finale's jarringly overcooked musings on how hope is the most powerful weapon in the world, blah, blah, blah. Following the climactic showdown with Zeus, *God of War III*'s rambling denouement concludes with a stifled yawn, not the roar you'd expect from a game that, at its best, achieves such dizzying heights. **JASON KILLINGSWORTH** **9.3**

CROSSWORD

WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

BY BRENDAN EMMETT QUIGLEY
(BRENDANEMMETTQUIGLEY.COM)



ACROSS

1 Magazine ad meas. (abbrev.)
5 *The Lord of the Rings* figure
10 ___ Scotia
14 *Black Holes and Revelations* band
15 Us, to a Rastafarian
16 Beasts of burden
17 Affectation
18 Flip side to *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning* band
20 Kings of Leon's record label
21 1977 double-platinum Steely Dan album
22 Pistols in punk
23 Flip side to *Seven Nation Army* band
30 First song on side three of Miles Davis's *Live-Evil*
31 *I'll Sleep When You're Dead* rapper
32 Peter of The Monkees
33 Television guitarist Verlaine
35 Frosts, as a cake
38 "Come to think of it..."
39 Flip side to the "Maps" band
43 "We Do Our Part" org.
44 Groom in *The Hangover*
45 Assn.
46 ___ *Your Enthusiasm*
48 "Who, me?"
50 Rockers with the 2009 album *White Ink Black Ink*
54 Flip side to *69 Love Songs* band
58 Cultural funding org.
59 Gabriel, for one
60 "All systems go"
61 Flip side to "Do You Realize??" band
66 Hemmed in
67 1970 hit by The Kinks
68 Dietary label (abbrev.)
69 Aces, sometimes
70 Lacking siblings
71 Departure doors
72 Secretary, e.g.

DOWN

1 Common sense
2 Eggy dish
3 Country that Monotonix is from
4 Nintendo's Super ___
5 "___ Get Any Onya?" (1970 Frank Zappa song)
6 Military hero
7 *Wheel of Fortune* buy
8 Food stat.
9 *No One's ___ and You're Next* (Modest Mouse album)
10 1944 Jean-Paul Sartre play
11 Prefix with acetylene
12 Certain intersection
13 Years, to Yves
19 "___ durn tootin'!"
21 Pale tan
24 Angler's hope
25 Sci-fi language whose profanities include "Ghuy'cha'" and "Qi'yaH"
26 Humane org.
27 Victoria Beckham
28 "-zoic" things
29 "What Would I Want? ___"
34 ___ jacket
36 Codgers' replies
37 Stranded at the chalet
39 "How ___!"
40 Dwell
41 Actor Cronyn
42 Advil target
43 ATM maker
47 Popular pain relief cream
49 1994 *SNL*-based bomb starring Julia Sweeney
51 *Seinfeld* gal
52 Eats up
53 "Shame on you!"
55 Pacific necklace
56 Punch server
57 Diets drastically
61 Progressive.com salesgirl
62 Harry Potter's pal
63 Sick
64 Fish for breakfast
65 "And ___ refuse?"
66 Pan, e.g.

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UNGLUED

BANDS YOU CAN'T GOOGLE

BY JEFF VRABEL

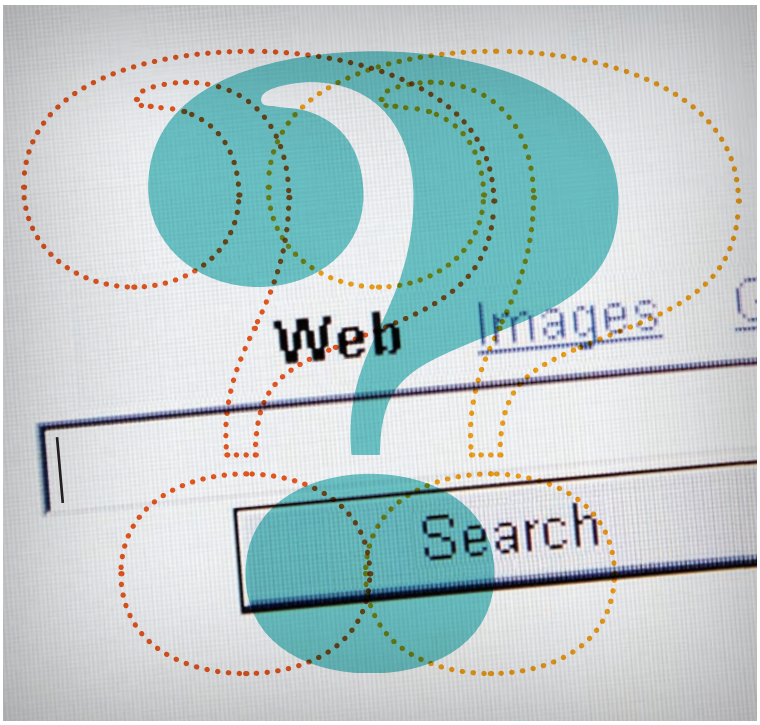
Rumor has it that early-'00s rap-rock ensemble Linkin Park chose to spell its name all funny-like for a simple reason: Someone had already grabbed lincolnpark.com, so the band went with pre-K phonetics and created the world's first known fusion of search engine optimization and gloppy nu-metal. Regrettably, thousands more were to come.

If you're going to get noticed online, you need to snag the teeny attention spans of potential new fans while staying accessible to old ones. Many bands address this problem with unconventional, eccentric or exceedingly dopey names like Them Crooked Vultures, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah or Taylor Swift. Yet plenty more clearly did not get the memo, because no one gets memos anymore, because they're all online stealing music. For instance, I recently received a PR pitch from a band called One. A Google search for this band turns up, in order: 1) a group fighting AIDS and poverty, 2) the integer before two and 3) coconut water, which was delicious, but my point remains.

Here are a few other bands bafflingly difficult to Google:

TELEVISION: Tom Verlaine's proto-punk band formed in New York City in 1973 where holy crap are you kidding me $850 for a 40" Samsung? NICE!

FINAL FANTASY: Canadian violinist Owen Pallett initially named his solo project after a convoluted role-playing game with 4,500 editions, which was a good move since gamers never have their own Web sites. But in December, Pallett announced he was "voluntarily" retiring the name to pursue his longtime dream of getting his own web traffic.



CINDERELLA: One wrong click and suddenly you're on a page full of ornate period costumes, soaring magical anthems and fabulous hairstyles. There are also some sites about the Disney movie.

HEALTH: A name that needs care, and also reform.

THE GAME: Are you a rapper who wants people to follow your weird abusive-father relationship with Dr. Dre? Make it so all they have to do is go to Google News, type "Game" and then click through 25,000 pages and you're all set.

LOVE: Despite what those ads tell you, it's terribly hard to find this online.

THE XX: You're just one keystroke away from never being able to return to the public library.

GIRLS: The only scenario in which searching for girls online is actually difficult. (See also: Barenaked Ladies.)

!!!: Turns out, Google only searches for keywords, not key punctuation marks. That's probably why no one uses the crappy site anyway.

FUN.: Not.

THE BAND: Really? The Band? Could you have come up with something *less* electrifying, like Some Guys In A House? Good luck trying to get famous or record an album with a folk-rock icon or have your farewell concert shot by an iconic American filmmaker with that name, jerks.

↪ JEFF VRABEL IS A SOUTH CAROLINA-BASED MUSIC WRITER, PATHOLOGICAL SPRINGSTEEN PERSON, "WEIRD AL" SCHOLAR AND FATHER OF AN ASPIRING DISNEY MONORAIL ENGINEER. HE CAN BE REACHED AT JEFFVRABEL.COM

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